Who was the greatest US president?
SEVEN HISTORIANS HAVE THEIR SAY

BBC HiSTORY MAGAZINE

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NEW EVIDENCE Has history's greatest mystery finally been solved?

HELL AT MONTE CASSINO

How the Allies bungled this brutal 1944 battle

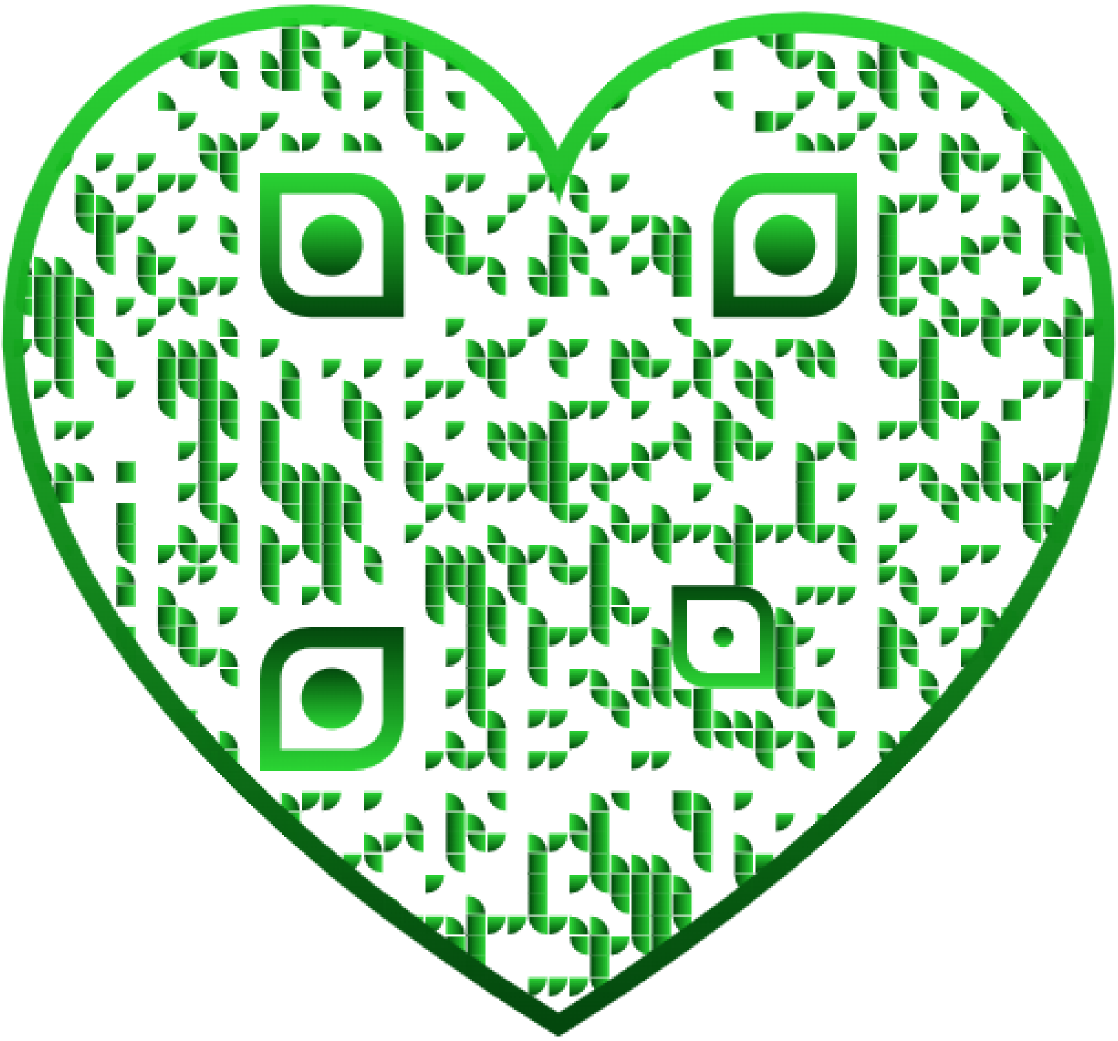
GUNPOWDER TERROR

Lucy Worsley on the radicalisation of the 1605 plotters

When was the best time to be alive?

The suffragette firestarter

How Lilian Lenton ignited the fight for women's votes



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“Some historical mysteries seem destined to remain forever unsolved. After a distance of several centuries, can we really expect to turn up new pieces of evidence that might lay matters to rest? Well, in the case of the **princes in the Tower**, some new evidence *has* emerged – and while it doesn't completely solve the crime, it certainly appears to strengthen the case against a few individuals. For our cover feature (page 29) we've interviewed Professor Tim Thornton, who made the discovery, alongside the popular historian Tracy Borman who has worked with Professor Thornton on the story. I have no doubt you will have your own thoughts, so do please write in and let us know.

In the next few weeks, Donald Trump will be sworn in as the **47th president of the United States** – the latest in a long line that stretches back to George Washington in 1789. But which president was the greatest? We put that question to seven experts and you can read their nominations from page 33. Some choices probably won't surprise you, but the list also features a few names that you might not expect. Again, do get in touch with your own views.

I'd like to end with a question: **what first sparked your love of history?** Was it a teacher, a film, a museum, or even a discussion with a grandparent? For this month's *Conversation* section, we put this query to a group of historians, and their answers include experiences that I'm sure will chime with many of you. Turn to page 11 to find out what they had to say.

I hope you enjoy the issue.

Rob Attar
Editor

THREE THINGS I'VE LEARNED THIS MONTH

1. Global wealth gap
In Kavita Puri's *Hidden Histories* column (page 18) she writes that the Mughal empire's annual revenue in the early 17th century was “100 times greater than that of England and Scotland under James VI & I”.

2. Blast from the past
Following the recent ravages of Storm Bert, it was interesting to read about the first recorded tornado in England, which struck in the late 11th century and apparently destroyed 600 houses (*Q&A*, page 55).

3. A royal first
From this month's *History Hero* (page 90), I discovered that the University of Cambridge only awarded full degrees to women in 1948. Interestingly, the first recipient was Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother.

THIS ISSUE'S CONTRIBUTORS

Lucy Worsley
“Why did Guy Fawkes and the gunpowder conspirators choose violence? It's helpful to see them through the filter of what we know about the radicalisation of extremists today.”
Lucy considers why the gunpowder plotters of 1605 resorted to terror on page 40

Matthew Gabriele
“The battle of Fontenoy shook the Carolingian empire and its participants to the core, creating reverberations that lasted for generations.”
Matthew tells the story (with David M Perry) of a ninth-century clash that reshaped Europe on page 70

Diane Atkinson
”Owing to her longevity and expertise at handling the media, we know more about the suffragette arsonist Lilian Lenton than many other people who campaigned for the vote. There she is in the BBC archives, proudly reliving those giddy years.”
Diane explores Lenton's remarkable life on page 60

James Holland
“I've been walking the ground of the Monte Cassino assaults for years, so it's been great to finally write about them – and to look in depth at the many letters, diaries and other sources that reveal the period afresh.”
James explains why the battle of Monte Cassino descended into a brutal slog on page 46

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LILIAN LENTON: THIS PAGE: GETTY IMAGES, DREAMSTIME, JOHNNY HALL, FRAN MONKS

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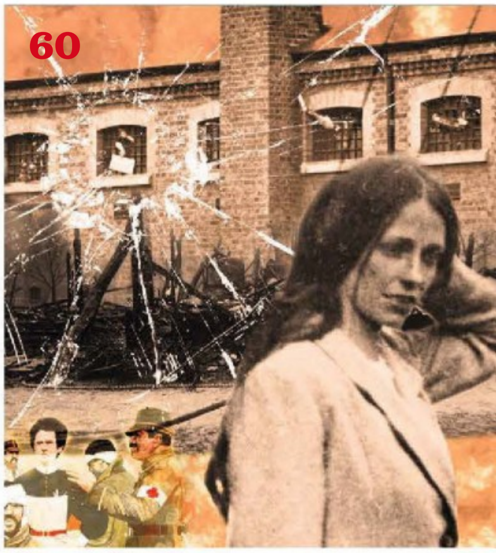
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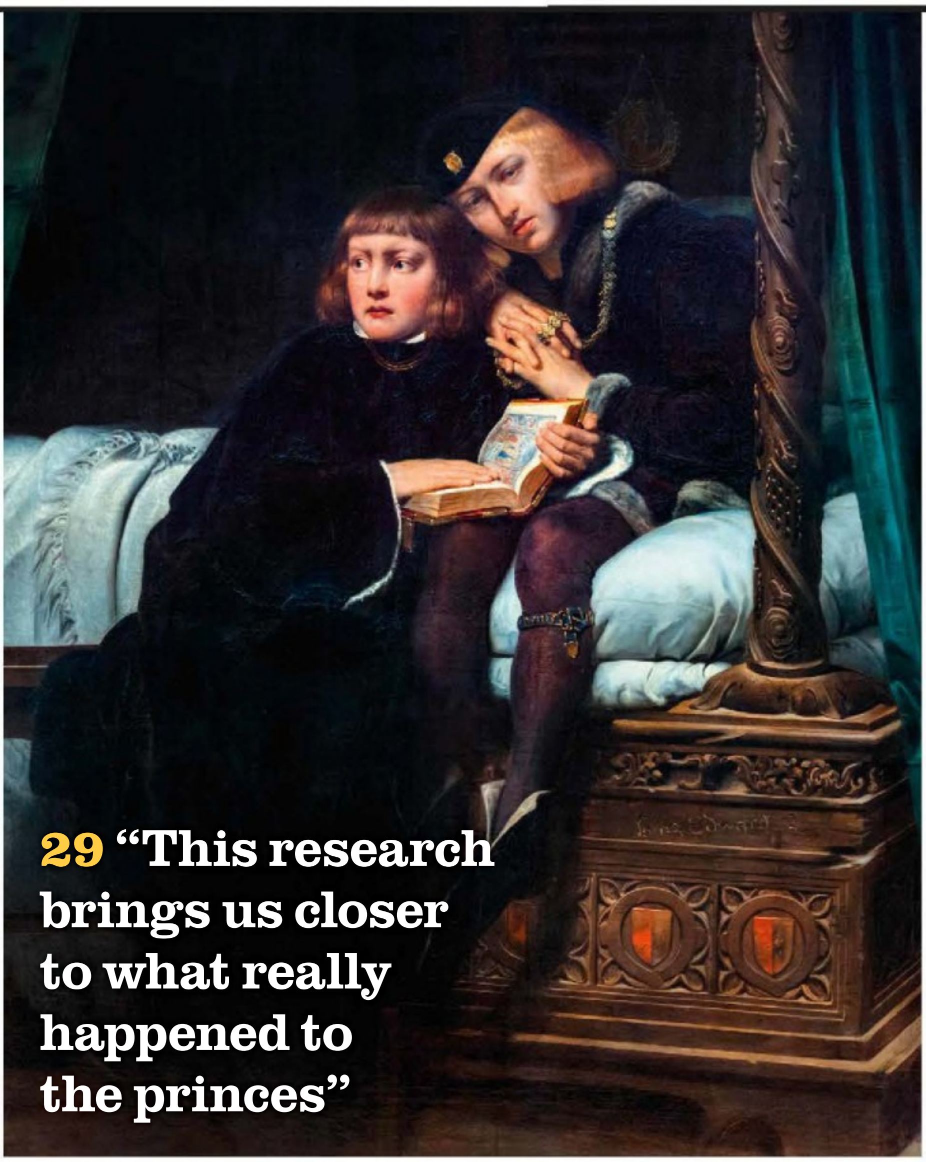

29 “This research brings us closer to what really happened to the princes”

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ANNIVERSARIES

DANNY BIRD highlights events that took place in January in history

30 JANUARY 1661

Oliver Cromwell is posthumously 'executed'

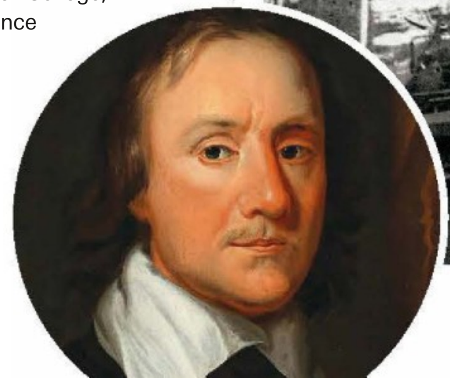
Charles II exacts gruesome vengeance on his father's nemesis

Twelve years to the day after Charles I's execution at Whitehall, his son and heir, Charles II, orchestrated an act of posthumous revenge on Oliver Cromwell, one of the chief architects of his father's demise. After Cromwell's death of natural causes in September 1658, his body had been embalmed and interred amid the splendour of Westminster Abbey's Henry VII Chapel.

In early 1661, though, his corpse – along with those of fellow regicides John Bradshaw and Henry Ireton – was exhumed and, on 30 January, the bodies were hauled to the gallows at the notorious execution site of Tyburn, where Marble Arch stands today. Here, Cromwell's remains were hung in chains, swaying grotesquely in the chilly breeze. This very public desecration signalled a profound reckoning with the previous decade's republican 'transgression', and drew spectators including the diarist Samuel Pepys, who wrote of witnessing the grisly scene.

Once taken down from the scaffold, Cromwell's corpse was decapitated, the body tossed into an unmarked grave and the head impaled on a 6-metre-tall pole above Westminster Hall. The head was exposed to the elements for more than 20 years, becoming a macabre tourist attraction, until it was either removed or blown off during a storm.

It later became something of a collector's item, passing through various private hands until the early 19th century, when it was bought by Josiah Henry Wilkinson. Finally, in 1960, the much-travelled head was buried in an undisclosed location within Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge, where Cromwell had once been an undergraduate.



Oliver Cromwell's corpse was exhumed and publicly humiliated on Charles II's orders

Shattered buildings are coated in a sticky sludge following the Great Molasses Flood that engulfed Boston's North End in January 1919

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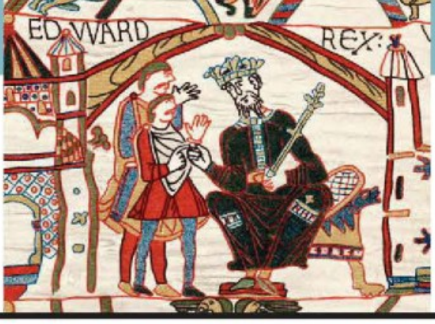
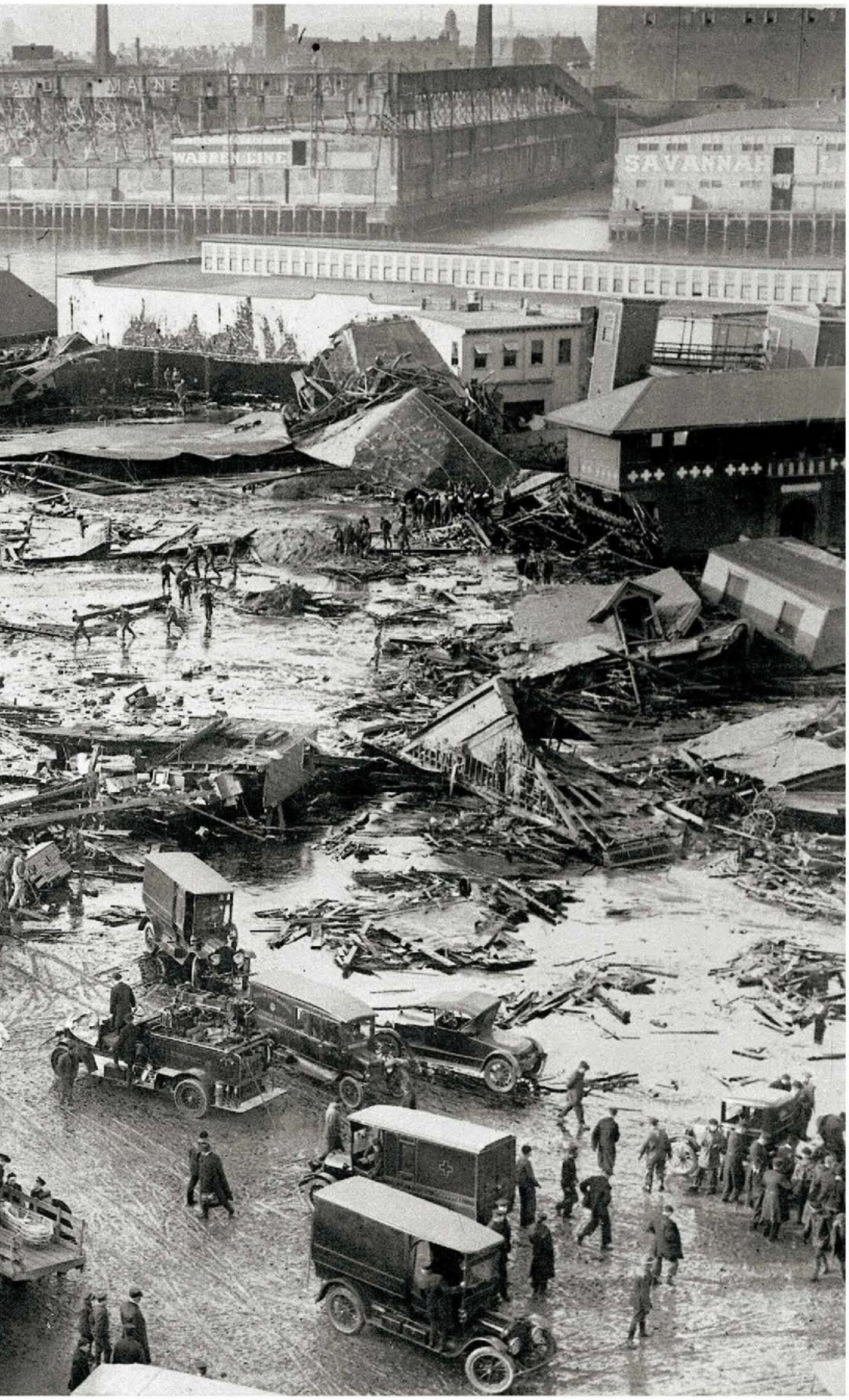


England's King Edward the Confessor, on the Bayeux Tapestry. His death in 1066 sparked a succession crisis

5 JANUARY 1066

King Edward the Confessor dies, leaving no direct heir to the English throne and sparking a succession crisis. Harold Godwinson claims the crown, as do Harald Hardrada and William, Duke of Normandy, leading to the **battle of Hastings** and the Norman conquest later that year.



15 JANUARY 1919

The Great Molasses Flood devastates Boston

An industrial accident wreaks chaos in the New England port

Shortly after 12.30pm on a wintery afternoon, an enormous steel tank owned by the Purity Distilling Company in Boston, Massachusetts exploded without warning. Unleashed from the 15,000-tonne vessel, a 2.3-million-gallon (8.7-million-litre) deluge of molasses tore through the city's North End neighbourhood at a breakneck 35 miles per hour.

Witnesses to the event recalled hearing a deep rumble in the moments before the catastrophe, followed by the loud staccato of rivets popping like machine-gun fire. Then the tank burst.

Later reports of the harrowing sight recounted a wave of molasses some 7.5 metres high sweeping through the area, flattening buildings like eggshells. The destruction was immediate and overwhelming. People, animals and debris were caught in the relentless torrent, engulfed in a thick tsunami. Tragically, 21 people lost their lives, and 150 others sustained injuries. Many drowned or suffocated, trapped in the dense sludge, struggling to escape its grip. Over the days that followed, rescuers waded through the molasses to free people trapped waist-deep in the molasses.

The tank, hastily constructed in 1915 to produce ethanol for munitions during the First World War, had been plagued with structural problems from the start, frequently leaking and creaking. The legal inquiry that followed the tragedy uncovered evidence that Purity Distilling had ignored numerous safety concerns about the vessel's integrity.

Boston carried the scars – and the smell – of the disaster for years afterwards. Some residents claimed that the aroma of molasses lingered for decades. Following months of legal proceedings, Purity Distilling was found liable and paid out $628,000 in damages – equivalent to around $11m today.

3 JANUARY 1868

Forces loyal to Emperor Mutsuhito **overthrow the isolationist Tokugawa shogunate in Japan**. The so-called Meiji Restoration reinstates imperial rule, initiates rapid modernisation and opens society to westernisation, transforming Japan into a powerful, industrialised nation.

Emperor Mutsuhito in 1873. Japan transformed into an industrialised nation under his rule

17 JANUARY 1961

Eisenhower warns against the "military–industrial complex"

The outgoing US president raises concerns about the future of American democracy

Millions of Americans tuned in to watch President Dwight D Eisenhower's farewell address as commander-in-chief. Eisenhower, the five-star general and national hero of the Second World War who had governed the US through the turbulent 1950s, might have been expected to offer an optimistic appraisal of the nation's progress. Instead, he delivered a surprising and stark warning about a danger he believed threatened American democracy from within: the "military–industrial complex".

This was a startlingly new and unsettling phrase, especially coming from a president renowned for his military credentials. Speaking from the Oval Office, Eisenhower described "an immense military establishment and a large arms industry" that, if left unchecked, could "endanger our liberties or democratic processes". At a time when Cold War anxieties were rising and, in response to Soviet missile advances, US military spending had surged to 15 per cent of GDP, his words struck a nerve, provoking a deep sense of unease about America's defence policy.

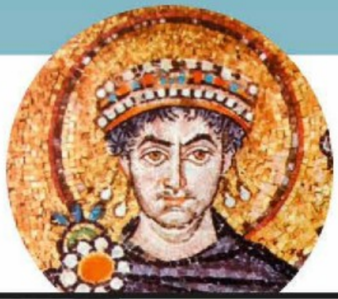
Eisenhower's concerns had intensified over time, with preparations for this speech beginning more than a year earlier. Although he had championed military strength throughout his career, the president had become increasingly perturbed by the burgeoning influence of defence contractors and by their close relationship with government officials. His speechwriter, Malcolm Moos, recalled the meticulous attention paid to each line. Initially, Eisenhower had intended to warn against a "military–industrial–scientific complex", but had softened the phrase to avoid alienating scientists and research institutions.

Major television networks including NBC and CBS broadcast the speech, leaving viewers to contemplate his sobering message. Some Americans dismissed Ike's warning as overly cautious; others saw it as sage advice in a rapidly uncertain world. Indeed, five years earlier, alarm about the confluence of powerful military, technocratic and political interests and their potential impact on liberties had been the focus of sociologist C Wright Mills' 1956 book *The Power Elite*, which had raised similar concerns to those addressed by Eisenhower's valedictory speech.

Made just days before one of the youngest US presidents in history, John F Kennedy, was due to take office, Eisenhower's address also looked to the future. "We – you and I, and our government – must avoid the impulse to live only for today, plundering, for our own ease and convenience, the precious resources of tomorrow. We cannot mortgage the material assets of our grandchildren without risking the loss also of their political and spiritual heritage."

It was a remarkably candid warning from the last US president born in the 19th century to the new space age: "We want democracy to survive for all generations to come, not to become the insolvent phantom of tomorrow."

US president Dwight D Eisenhower delivers his farewell address to the nation, in which he warned of the dangers of a burgeoning "military–industrial complex"



A sixth-century mosaic of Byzantine emperor Justinian. His reign saw violent riots erupt in Constantinople (now Istanbul)

11 (OR 13) JANUARY 532

The Nika riots erupt in the Byzantine capital Constantinople as factions known as the Blues and Greens – ostensibly fans of chariot-racing teams – unite to protest Emperor Justinian's rule. Chaos engulfs the city as a mob sets fire to various public buildings.

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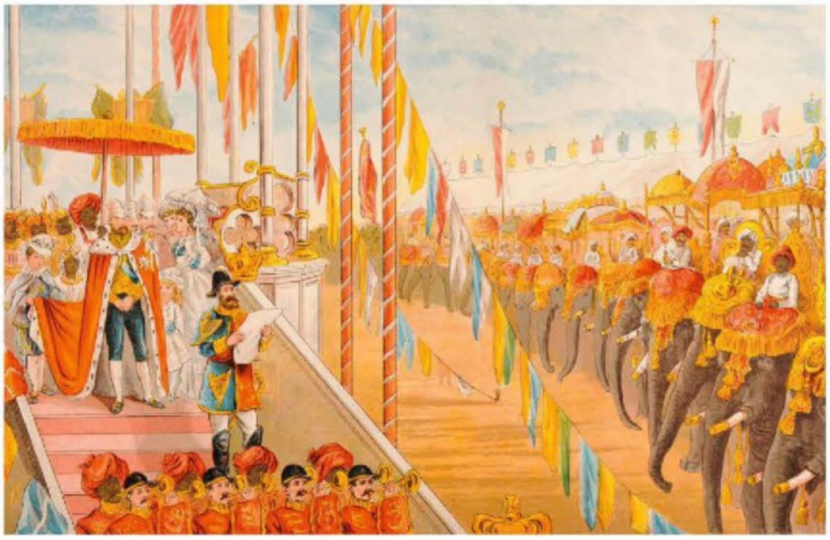


Victoria is proclaimed Empress of India at the first Delhi Durbar, overseen by Viceroy Lord Lytton

1 JANUARY 1877

Queen Victoria becomes Empress of India

An opulent ceremony in Delhi heralds a new dawn in Anglo-Indian affairs

While Queen Victoria and her family spent the first morning of 1877 at Windsor, thousands of miles away in Delhi a dazzling ceremony was taking place to proclaim her Empress of India. This title was hard-won by prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, who had fiercely lobbied parliament to pass the Royal Titles Act of 1876. Many Liberal MPs had baulked at the creation of the imperial title, suspecting autocratic designs.

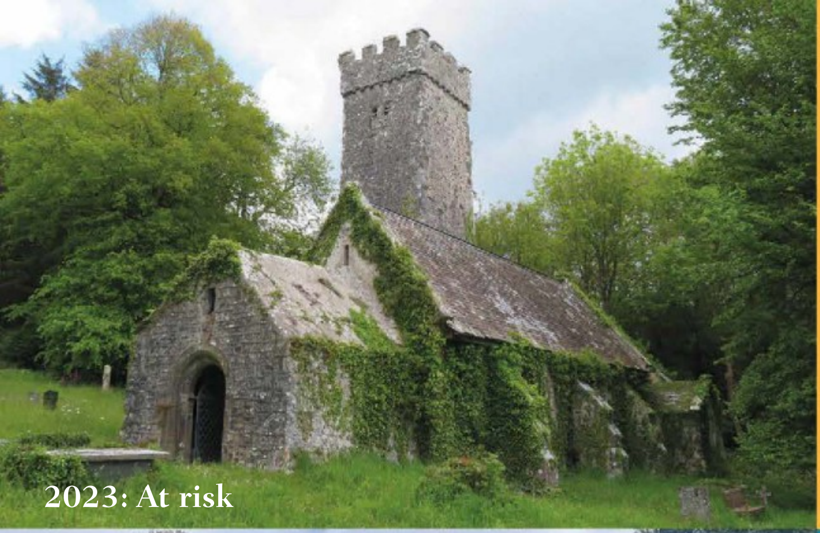
The first Delhi Durbar was a lavish spectacle presided over by Viceroy Lord Lytton, who sought to showcase British dominance. Leading a grand procession of 400 Indian rulers, blending Mughal-inspired pageantry with imperial grandeur, he proclaimed Victoria's new title beneath a vast portrait of the queen-empress herself.

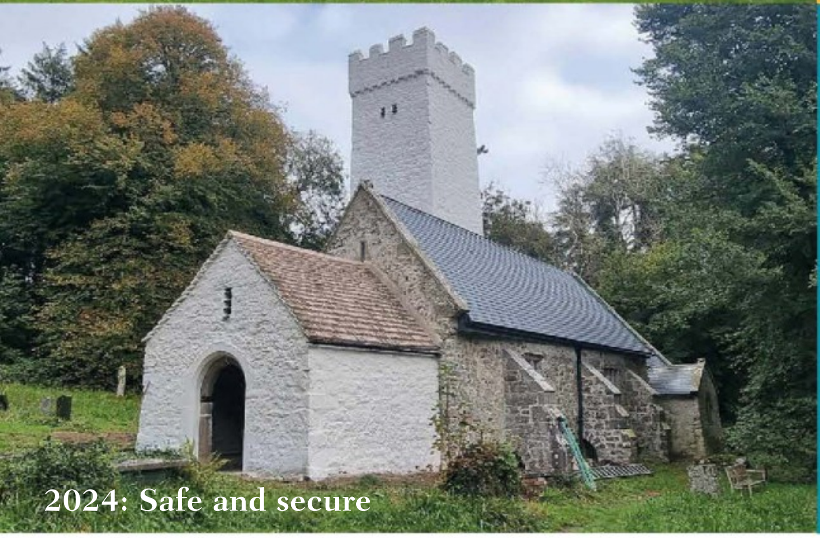
Disraeli had maintained that the title symbolised Britain's legitimate dominion over India, and served to reflect Victoria's standing alongside the imperial powers of her European counterparts. Moreover, it firmly asserted British control following the bloody Indian Rebellion of 1857.

That uprising, born of contempt for the East India Company's oppressive rule, had prompted Britain to assume direct control of the subcontinent. Victoria had assured her new subjects that their "rights, dignity and honour" would be protected. Disraeli promoted the title as a means to both formalise this bond and consolidate British authority over a vast and diverse land.

For Victoria, the title was also a personal victory. Her eldest child, Vicky, was destined to become empress of the new German empire – a superficial imbalance that rankled with the British monarch. While the Empress of India never actually set foot in her Asian realm, Victoria's fascination with the subcontinent soon triggered a passion for all things Indian in Britain.

Danny Bird is content producer on *BBC History Magazine*


2023: At risk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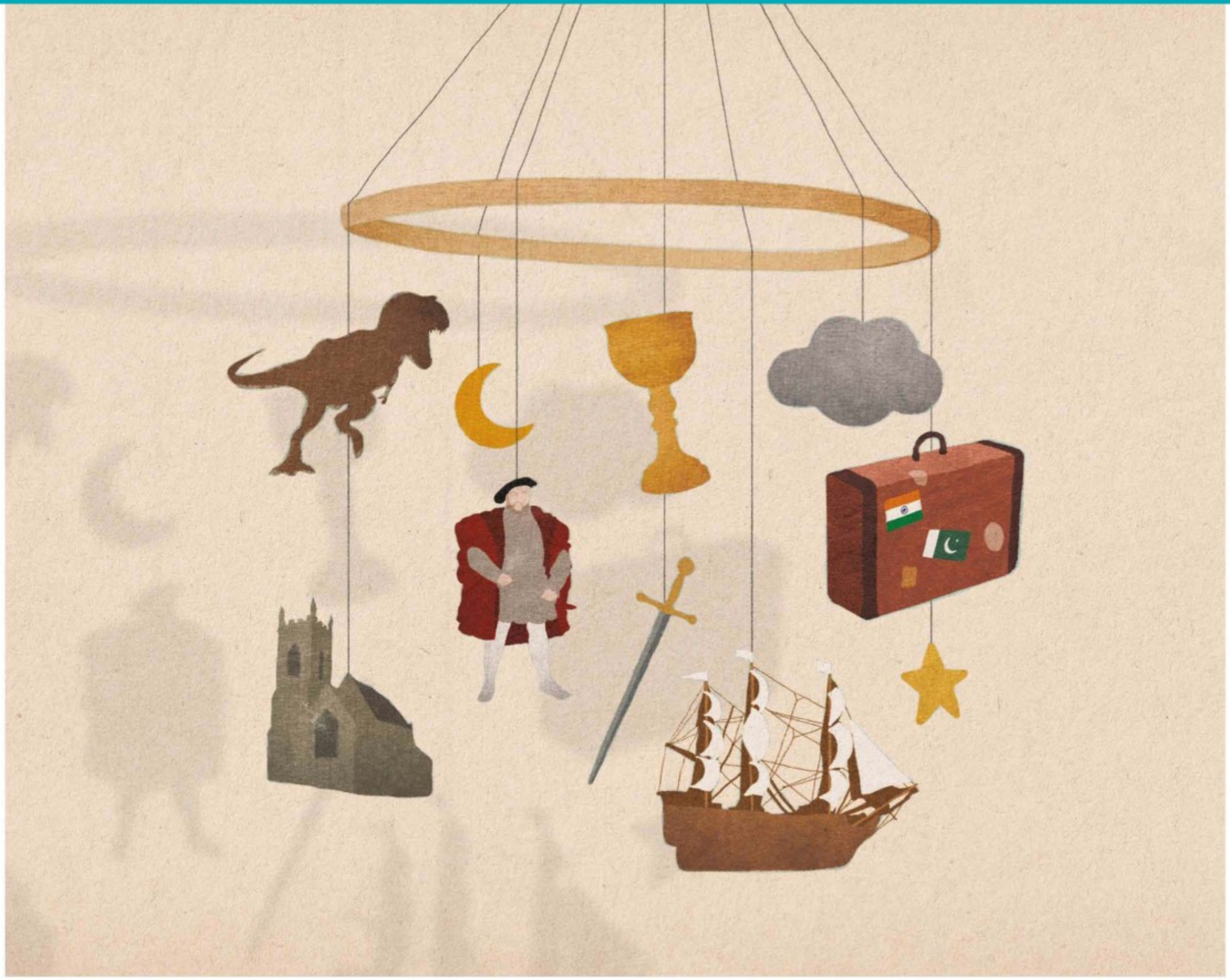

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THE BIG QUESTIONS

What inspires our love of history?

What events or youthful experiences nurture an enduring fascination for centuries gone? A diverse panel of historians reveal the pivotal moments that sparked their lifelong passion for the past

INTERVIEWS BY **MATT ELTON**

"When I was just four, I received an inspirational gift that helped steer the direction of my career"

NICOLA TALLIS

When I reminisce about my childhood, one aspect stands out in my memory: my love of history. I can't remember a time when history hasn't been a part of my life, and my passion for it was kindled in my earliest days. I was only two or three years old when my mum began to read me tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, and before long they became a regular part of my bedtime routine. I was fascinated by the stories of the sword in the stone and the Holy Grail, and I was captivated by Lancelot and Guinevere.

When I was four, though, I received a gift that would prove so inspirational that – unbeknown to me at the time – it helped to steer the direction of my career: *The Weetabix Illustrated British History Book*.

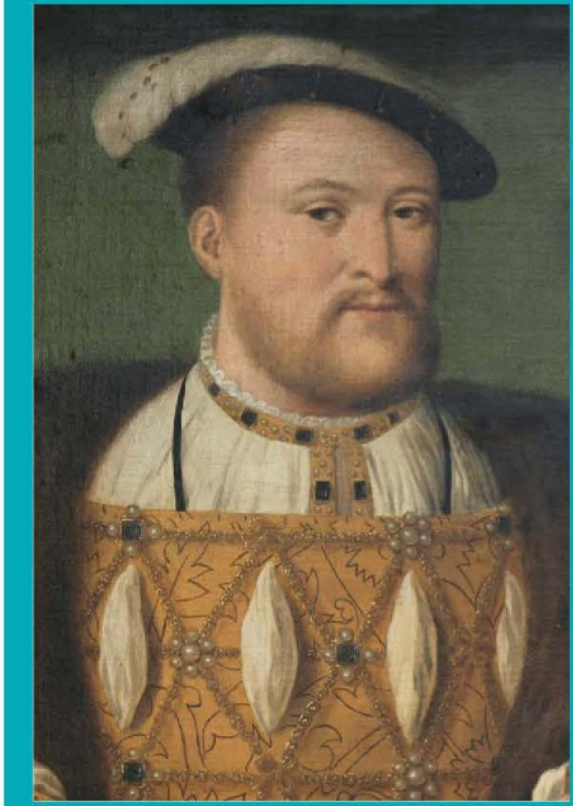
When my mum gave me this tome, published in 1989, I doubt she thought much beyond the fact that it might open for me a gateway into something or someone other than King Arthur – and she was absolutely right.

I vividly remember flicking through the pages and admiring the pictures – and then I came to one image that really captured my attention: Henry VIII and his six wives. The idea of a king who had married six times fascinated the infant me, and I used the book to memorise the classic rhyme about their fates: divorced, beheaded, died; divorced, beheaded, survived. Simply from viewing pictures of a king and his spouses, my love of the Tudors was born – and snowballed.

That slender volume was my starting point, and soon it began to show signs of wear. I became determined to find out all I could about Henry VIII and his extraordinary family – a journey that I'm still undertaking to this day. If I hadn't been given that book as a child, I'm certain that my career would've taken an entirely different direction. It was a small thing – but one that made a lasting impact.

……

Nicola Tallis is a historian, author and researcher. Her books include *Young Elizabeth: Princess. Prisoner. Queen* (Michael O'Mara Books, 2024) and *All the Queen's Jewels 1445–1548: Power, Majesty and Display* (Routledge, 2022)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Families in Leicester in 1974, a time of struggle and solidarity for first-generation immigrants such as Ciara Garcha's grandfather; the Coronation Chair in Westminster Abbey fascinated young Alice Loxton; Henry VIII, whose marital history inspired Nicola Tallis's interest in the Tudor dynasty

GETTY IMAGES/TOPFOTO

“Hearing my granddad’s experiences first inspired me to dig into histories of race and migration in 20th-century Britain”

CIARA GARCHA

My granddad has always been a storyteller. It never takes much to get him started, recounting an experience or an episode from decades ago and thousands of miles away. His stories have ranged across time and space. He spoke of his memories of the death trains coming into his village during the partition of India, arriving at the station carrying only devastation. He recalled how cold it was when he first arrived in England: the biting wind and the grey skies sprawling overhead. When he moved to the West Midlands town he still lives in today, in the early 1960s, he was one of only six Indian residents.

It was these that first got me thinking about the histories that would shape my life and journey. Hearing him recall his activism, his role in the fight against the National Front and far-right racism in the 1960s and 1970s, moments of struggle and solidarity – these episodes introduced me to histories that have defined my work. Hearing my grandad’s memories, from meetings at the local branch of the Indian Workers’ Association to time spent in an Irish pub – the only one nearby without a ‘No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs’ sign – introduced me to the challenges endured and resistance mounted by black and Asian communities in post-Second World War Britain.

My granddad often told his stories in a nonchalant manner, slipping recollections of incidents from decades ago into normal conversation. As I have latterly come to appreciate, though, these tales were more than mere chat: they were testimony – ways of sharing the experiences often elided from our histories. The stories of first-generation immigrants such as my grandparents are vital oral histories, preserving details and perspectives that otherwise might be lost.

It was these that first inspired me to dig into histories of race and migration in 20th-century Britain, and which sparked my curiosity for the voices missing and overshadowed in our histories.

Ciara Garcha featured in History Extra’s ‘30 under 30’ list. She works on histories of race and migration, and is doing her PhD at the University of Cambridge

“I was captivated by the thought that Elizabeth I had once put her hands inside these gloves, admiring the gold embroidery”

ALICE LOXTON

One early experience that inspired my love of history was peering into a glass cabinet in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Inside was a beautiful pair of white gloves made of leather, silk and gold thread. Incredibly, these had once belonged to Elizabeth I, and had been presented to her during a visit to the University of Oxford in 1566.

I was captivated by the thought that Elizabeth – who seemed to me like a character from an old story – had been a real person, as alive as you and I. She had once put her hands inside the objects in front of me, and probably admired the gold embroidery as I did, or stroked the leather.

This thrill inspired another visit – this time to Westminster Abbey. How exciting it was to explore this magnificent church for the first time, and to gaze upon its splendours as so many others have done in centuries past. I spent time admiring the Coronation Chair, now well over 700 years old, imagining each monarch sitting on it. Did they slouch? Or did they recline? Did some slip around in their robes, weighed down by heavy jewels?

Next I arrived at the tomb of Elizabeth I. For perhaps an hour we gazed upon the large white marble effigy in the north aisle of the Henry VII Chapel. The body of the ‘Virgin Queen’ is interred in the vault below this figure, her coffin placed above that of her half-sister, Mary I.

Twenty years later, looking back on that time, such experiences remain vivid – and were key to my passion for history. Of course, I loved reading about it, learning at school, and watching documentaries. But it was the physical aspect – seeing an object or being in a space – that provided the initial spark. It is testament to the importance of museums and historic buildings, and their transformative potential. Who knows which peculiar object might trigger the interest of a small child, inspiring a love of learning that burns bright for a lifetime?

Alice Loxton is a historian, presenter and author. Her latest book is *Eighteen: A History of Britain in 18 Young Lives* (Pan Macmillan, 2024)

"With an overactive imagination fuelled by the characters I saw on TV, I soon became obsessed with storytelling"

CHARLIE EVE

Quotes such as "This is Sparta!" and "Are you not entertained?" dominated my childhood. Although period films – *300*, *Gladiator*, *Braveheart* – took dramatic licence and often forcefully bent historical facts, their booming soundtracks and gritty Hollywood actors sparked my interest in history as a young lad.

Every weekend, my dad would introduce me to some epic film or invest hours in the Discovery Channel, nurturing my fixation with the battle-scarred heroes of the big screen. I also treasured my battered copy of a dinosaur encyclopaedia, devoured the BBC show *Walking with Dinosaurs*, and developed a ridiculous obsession with Dr Alan Grant from *Jurassic Park*. Soon I could name almost every dinosaur.

I have no idea why I didn't become a palaeontologist, but I do know how I came to love history: watching it come to life before my very eyes. With an overactive imagination fuelled by the characters I saw on TV, I soon became obsessed with storytelling and would devour any medium I could get my hands on. I realised early on that I'm a visual learner, so watching Roman legions march across the screen, maps light up with advances across the western front, and prehistoric giants roaming the Earth was the best way for me to soak up information.

Fast forward to 2018, and I graduated from university with a degree in Television and Film, kickstarting a nearly seven-year (so far) career as a camera operator, editor, writer and producer. Moving from my small hometown of Hartlepool to booming Manchester only strengthened my interest in history. Having so many different eras on my doorstep, I now have access to a treasure trove of tales to tell, from the original Roman settlement to relics from the industrial age and secrets from both world wars.

Today I'm a broadcaster telling stories about British history. I still obsess over the same historical heroes and villains as young Charlie did – but now I get to bring those stories to life in my own way, through my social media channels.

Charlie Eve is a broadcaster who made HistoryExtra's '30 under 30' list. He posts on social media as *@thehistorymagpie*

"At HMS *Victory*, history was no longer something interesting but abstract – now I could reach out and touch it"

ZACK WHITE

From the moment when I understood that the past really existed, it has fascinated me. Soon I was reading every library book I could find, whether it was about the Romans, the Egyptians, the *Titanic* or the Second World War.

Yet there weren't many chances for a child from a single-parent family on a council estate to engage with something tangible from those periods. That changed at the age of 12, though, when a friend handed me a copy of *Sharpe's Trafalgar* by Bernard Cornwell. Suddenly I was immersed in a new world: that of Napoleonic-era naval warfare.

Cornwell's fast-paced writing style and visceral combat scenes turned my bedroom into the deck of a battleship. Yet still the past was trapped in my mind's eye – until my mother took me to see HMS *Victory*, Nelson's flagship at the battle of Trafalgar, in Portsmouth on Trafalgar Day.

That experience ignited something within me. No longer was history something interesting but abstract. Now I could reach out and touch it – see the cramped conditions, smell the wooden, earthy aroma, and hear the thumps and creaks as people moved across the deck. History came to life and plunged me into a world where I stood gaping in wide-eyed astonishment at what it must have felt like to live and fight in this wooden behemoth.

Some say that whacking my head that day on *Victory*'s low beams knocked the sense out of me. I say it did something far more powerful: it fired a neuron.

Two decades later, working at the University of Portsmouth, I can visit the origin of my passion on my lunch break. Though my research has now drifted towards the experiences of soldiers rather than sailors, my fascination with how humans coped with the horrors of war has never left. I wander those decks, drinking in the same sights and smells, and marvel at how stepping aboard that ship empowered me to make a career out of my passion for Napoleonic history.

Zack White is a research fellow at the University of Portsmouth, and host of *The Napoleonic Wars Podcast*

DREAMSTIME/ALAMY

What experiences inspired your love of history? Tell us about those pivotal moments in your youth by emailing *letters@historyextra.com*

"I was taken to commercial excavations during school holidays – which I'm sure would no longer be allowed"

ALFRED HAWKINS

It is difficult to think of a distinct experience that fostered my interest in history. Having grown up in the 1990s, I've got to give *Horrible Histories* an honourable mention. It is also impossible not to recognise the fact that I was raised in Hastings, which is so well known for 'the battle of' or as '1066 Country'. Some of my clearest early memories are of places or objects associated with the conquest: Pevensey Castle, Hastings Castle, Battle Abbey, the Bayeux Tapestry. The inescapable presence of this history made me keenly aware of the importance of place, landscapes and buildings in our collective memory and in helping us understand the past.

My most formative experiences, though, stem from the fact that both of my parents are archaeologists, my mum later becoming an archivist. Because of this, archaeology, museums and heritage were permanent fixtures in my childhood. I was often taken to my local museum archive, or to commercial excavations during school holidays – the latter of which I'm sure would no longer be allowed. During these visits, I would talk to archaeologists about what they were excavating, or to researchers in the local studies room about what they had found.

My parents' personal passion for the subject extended to our days out, during which we'd visit churches or Iron Age hillforts, all posing intriguing questions. What stories do those different phases of stonework tell? How did those ditches work? Why is this fort built here?

Unfortunately, I didn't appreciate it at the time. I distinctly remember not wanting to see yet another parish church but to instead visit a theme park, like my friends. In hindsight, though, it was a remarkable gift.

It was the experience I gained through this exposure to the interlocking stories of history that made me want to become a historian and archaeologist.

Alfred Hawkins is assistant curator of historic buildings for the Tower of London and Banqueting House for Historic Royal Palaces. He is also cathedral archaeologist at Portsmouth Cathedral

FROM TOP: The restored gun deck of HMS *Victory*, which transported the young Zack White back to the maritime world of the Napoleonic Wars; growing up in the shadow of Hastings Castle, Alfred Hawkins "became keenly aware of the importance of place, landscapes and buildings in our collective memory"; history in *Gladiator* and *300* sparked a passionate interest in the distant past for Charlie Eve

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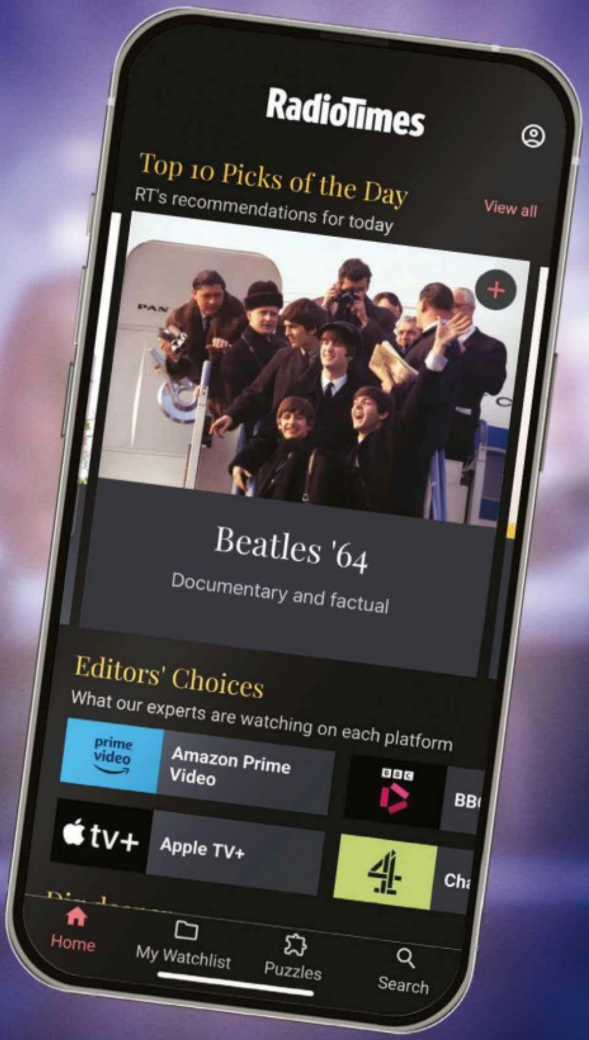

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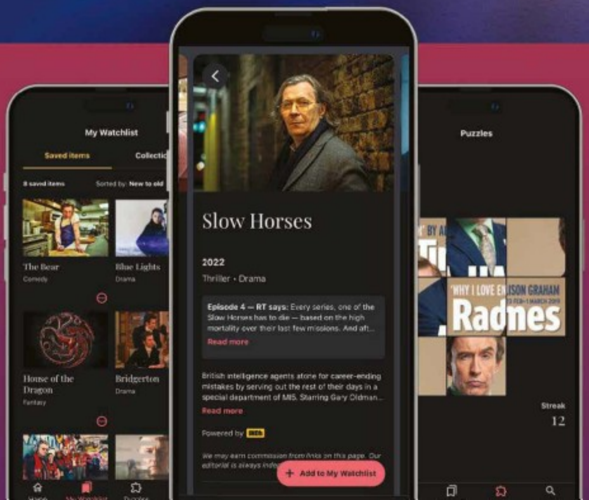

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MICHAEL WOOD ON…

REDISCOVERING THE ANCIENT HERITAGE OF MESOPOTAMIA

FRAN MONKS

"A British Museum team found the Temple of the White Thunderbird"

There are some historical landscapes that never let go of their hold on your imagination. One in particular has haunted me since I was a boy: Mesopotamia, about which I first read in Leonard Cottrell's book *Land of the Two Rivers* and then later in Samuel Noah Kramer's *History Begins at Sumer*. That feeling only intensified when I first went there in the late 1980s at the end of the Iran–Iraq War. Here civilisation first arose on Earth, yet the achievements of humanity have been wiped out time and again by violence and war, by climate change, and by the tides of history. Nowhere, to my mind, speaks more eloquently of the fragility of civilisation.

South Iraq, the heartland of cities, is now a desolate land of parched yellow sand with blazing sunsets and purple dawns, dotted with the remains of the first cities on earth: Uruk, Nippur, Umma, Lagash, Girsu and Larsa – names among the most resonant in the human story.

I remember once driving from the ruins of Warka (as Uruk is known today) to Larsa across a windblown wilderness of sand. The ancient river beds of the Euphrates were still visible; huge funerary mounds from the Hellenistic age, vast cones of eroded brick, loomed out of the haze; black tents of the Bedouin hugged the horizon. The site of Warka, inhabited from perhaps the fifth millennium BC to the seventh century AD, is 30 metres deep in the debris of thousands of years of human habitation. At Nippur, little village children came up with medieval Islamic glass and Jewish incantation bowls. There was a rabbinical school here in the 10th century, along with a Muslim mosque, a Christian church and a Manichaean temple. That rich life finally dried up in the 13th century, though I daresay there are still descendants of ancient Sumer among the people in the nearby village of Souk al-Afej.

These images came to mind when I recently opened *The Temple of Ningirsu: The Culture of the Sacred in Mesopotamia* by Sébastien Rey (Eisenbrauns, 2024). Its austere title hides as fascinating and rewarding a book on archaeology as you can imagine. It's about the excavation and reconstruction of a temple of one of the great Sumerian cities. Between 2016 and 2022, a British Museum team digging into the mound at the ancient city of Girsu found the Temple of the White Thunderbird, the chief cult centre of the god Ningirsu, built by the Sumerian ruler Gudea in c2125 BC. Here for the first time fully realised with wonderful colour reconstructions, this project is a fantastic example of the excitement of archaeology.

The book is also a fascinating detective story. The site had first been dug by the French from the 1870s to the 1930s, in the early years on an industrial scale. They found extraordinary buildings and wonderful treasures: today, the Louvre in Paris has no less than 10 statues of Gudea from his shrine, and there are two more in the British Museum in London. But the French left destruction behind them. Before the British Museum team started in 2016, they feared that all hope of untangling the story was lost. Yet what has emerged is the tale of human life in Girsu for 3,000 years. Staring at the images of the restored temple gave me the same thrill of excitement that I had experienced a lifetime ago when I first understood that history does indeed begin at Sumer.

At the heart of the story is Gudea. Recorded on his foundation inscription, he describes a divinely inspired dream in which the god Ningirsu appeared in all his terrifying glory and urged him to construct a beautiful temple that would bring prosperity to his people: fields rich in wheat, levees brimming with fresh water, and "more wool than ever will be weighed in Sumer". Gudea built the temple, bringing raw materials from Iran and Oman, cedar from the mountains of Lebanon, and teak and lapis from the distant Indus valley. His magnificent shrine lasted until it was destroyed in the second century BC and was eventually covered by the shifting sands of Iraq.

But all trace of the Temple of the White Thunderbird was not, after all, obliterated, and Gudea's story has now been thrillingly brought back to life. So next time you are in the British Museum (or the Louvre), take a moment to look at the majestic black basalt statue of Gudea, who still looks out at us, hands locked together in prayer, after all these millennia. In an astounding piece of retrieval, his Temple of Ningirsu has been restored to its proper place: a foundational part of our collective memory as human beings.

Michael Wood is professor of public history at the University of Manchester. He has presented numerous BBC series. His latest book is *In the Footsteps of Du Fu* (Simon & Schuster, 2023). You'll find him on X at *MichaelWoodMV*

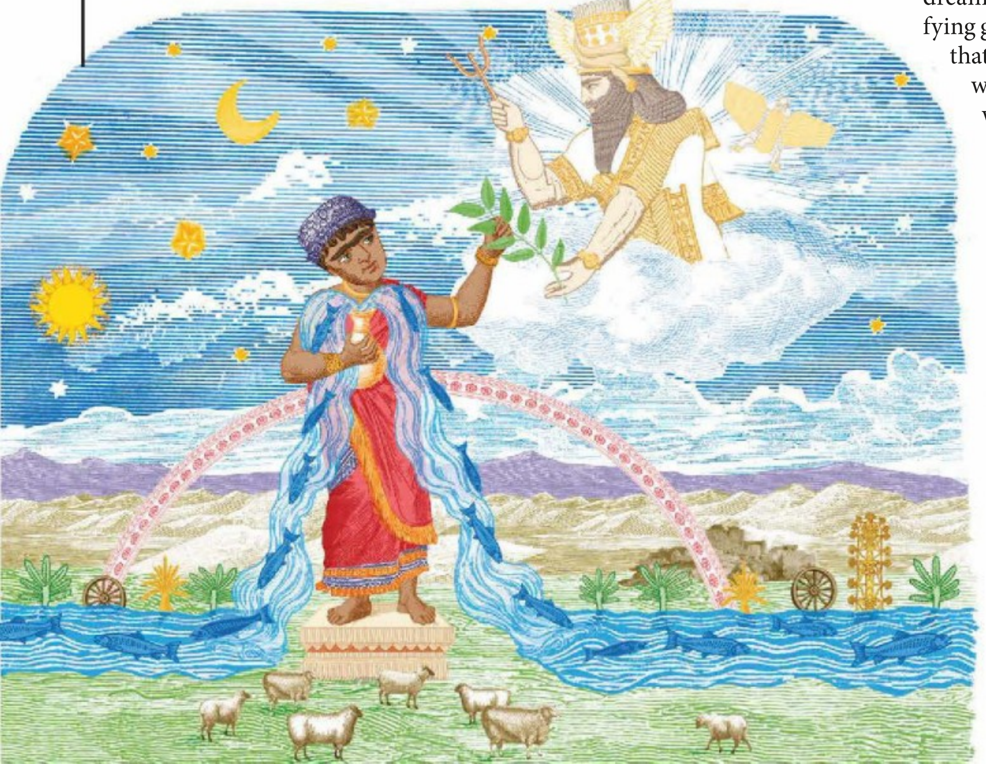


ILLUSTRATION BY **FEMKE DE JONG**

HIDDEN HISTORIES

KAVITA PURI on the cultural achievements of the Mughal empire

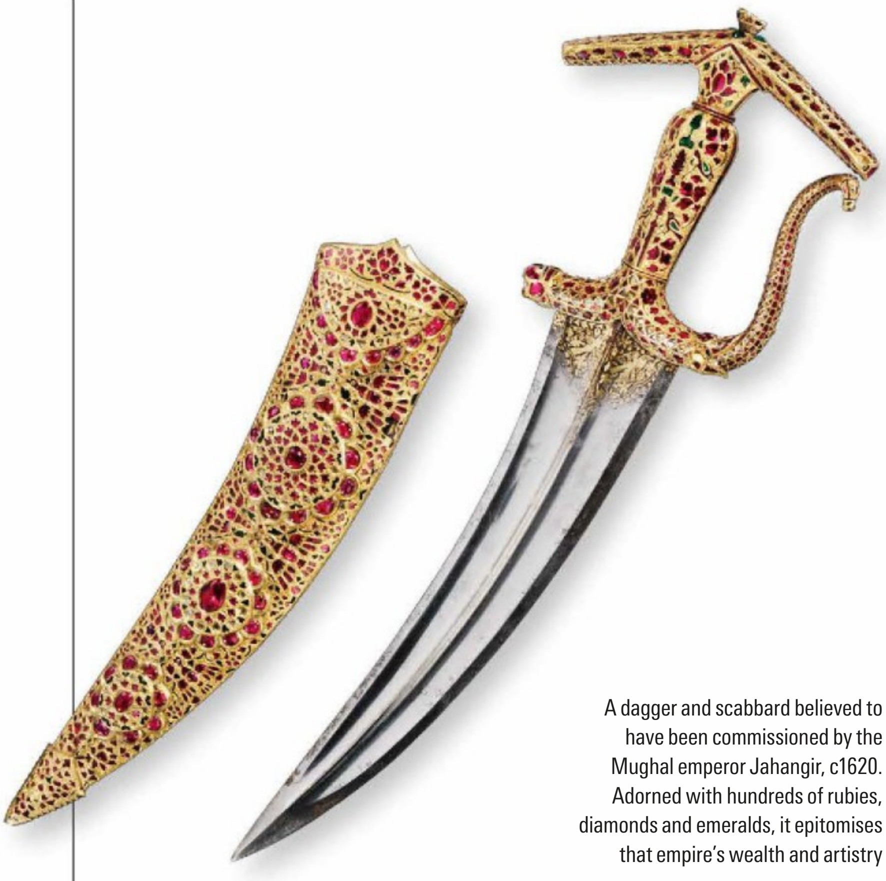
"This breathtaking exhibition celebrates a golden age of Mughal art"

Kavita Puri is a journalist and broadcaster for BBC Radio 4. Her latest BBC Sounds podcast, *Three Million*, charts the 1943 Bengal Famine and won Gold in the New Podcast category at this year's British Podcast Awards

RECENTLY I ADMIRED A DAGGER AND SCABBARD set with 1,685 rubies, 271 unpolished diamonds and 62 emeralds – probably one of the most exquisite you will ever see. It is one of more than 200 objects showcased in a breathtaking new exhibition at London's Victoria and Albert Museum: *The Great Mughals: Art, Architecture and Opulence*. (In the interests of transparency, a declaration: I am a trustee at the V&A.)

This dazzling collection, ranging from miniatures and mother-of-pearl cabinets to intricate carpets and bronzeware, draws primarily from the courts of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan. Representing three generations of the same family, and ruling from 1556 to 1658, they are considered by many to be the three greatest emperors of the Mughal dynasty. The exhibition celebrates what curators describe as the golden age of art and craft during the reign of these three leaders who ruled what was at the time one of the richest empires on Earth.

Believed to have been descended from Genghis Khan, Akbar, the third Mughal emperor, acceded to the throne at the age of just 13. During his near-50-year reign, the arts flourished. Calligraphers, painters and poets were some of those whose work was in great demand, receiving patronage not only from the emperor but also from family members, regional governors and the wider elite.



A dagger and scabbard believed to have been commissioned by the Mughal emperor Jahangir, c1620. Adorned with hundreds of rubies, diamonds and emeralds, it epitomises that empire's wealth and artistry

V&A

Akbar himself was unable to read and write – perhaps because of dyslexia, some historians believe. Yet during his rule he built a House of Books, employing both Hindu and Muslim artists to create vast libraries of illuminated manuscripts. As well as Persian literary classics, there were translations of the Sanskrit epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The court engaged with Jesuits, who had come to the subcontinent from Portugal, and biblical texts were translated here, as well as a biography of Jesus.

In the early 17th century, Thomas Roe travelled from London to act as ambassador to the court of Jahangir – Akbar's son and successor – the first official encounter between England and the Mughal empire. Writing home, in awe of the splendour and artistry of the court as well as its wealth, Roe described it as the "treasury of the world". At the time, that empire's annual revenue was 100 times greater than that of England and Scotland under James VI & I. While Roe found much to dislike about India – including the food, and its explosive effects on his bowels – he admired Jahangir's religious tolerance, creating an environment so different from the situation back home.

During this golden age, which spanned just over a century, artists fused ideas, techniques and materials from all over the Indian subcontinent as well as from Persia, the Ottoman world, Europe and China. Displayed at the V&A is, for example, a jug made in Lahore by Armenian craftsmen, with Iranian details. It's just one of many objects reflecting the fact that the empire's vast aesthetic achievement was predicated on a policy of active pluralism, a culture of cosmopolitanism, and scholarly inquiry.

Today, not everyone wonders at the Mughals' artistry. Hindu nationalist views of that period have hardened, and its history is being rewritten. Sites with Mughal heritage are contested, and history books edited. That's why exhibitions such as this matter.

Fortunately, the creative legacy of that period lives on – not least in the iconic Taj Mahal, one of the most recognisable buildings in the world. Inspired by the Florentines, it's made of white marble and inset with semi-precious stones. This famous monument to love was built by Shah Jahan, Akbar's grandson, as a mausoleum for his favourite wife, Mumtaz Mahal, who died giving birth to their 14th child. After Shah Jahan's son, Aurangzeb, succeeded to the throne in 1658, he expanded the empire to its greatest extent. However, after his reign – also lasting nearly 50 years – a long decline set in, and in 1858 the British formally took control of India.

Mughal rule may be in the distant past – but consider what was achieved during that halcyon era of the arts: the beauty of its objects, the exquisite technical detail of the craftsmanship, and a creativity rooted in cultural hybridity that continues to inspire awe today. H

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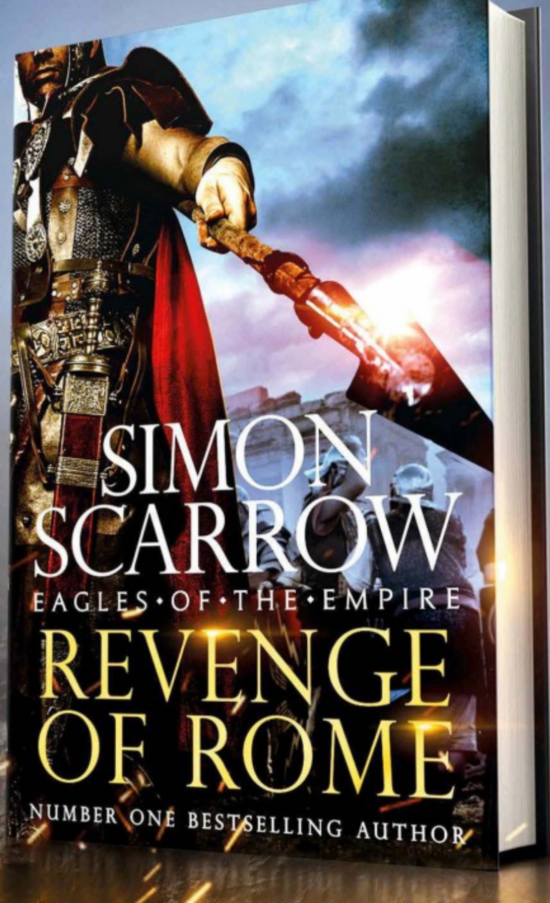
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LETTERS

Churchill with his wife Clementine and General Bruce Hamilton, 1912. Our piece pondering his status as a leading light of British history sparked debate

LETTER OF THE MONTH

Marathon man

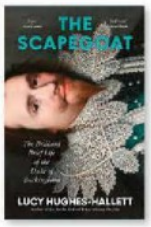
I was interested to read Eugene Byrne's piece on marathon dancing (*Q&A*, December). As a BBC radio presenter, I interviewed the world champion marathon dancer in 1988. He had danced for 3,501 hours over 145 days in 1932 at the end of Million Dollar Pier in Atlantic City. In more easily understood terms, that's almost five months of dancing. He still holds the record, as he likely will forever – and he is perhaps better known as 1950s singer Frankie Laine (pictured below in 1951).

When I asked him why he had made the attempt, his answer was very simple: the money and the food, along with the fact it got him noticed and helped him secure a foothold in the music industry as a singer.

It seems to have worked. Laine had numerous hits, including 'I Believe', the bestselling single in the UK in 1953 – a record banned by the BBC, because it didn't feel the religious element was appropriate. This decision still rankled with Laine in 1988. Other hits included the theme to *Rawhide*, a TV series on which he also once appeared as a guest actor alongside a very young Clint Eastwood. Laine died in 2007 at the age of 93, after a career that spanned 75 years.

When I interviewed him, he had only recently undergone a triple heart bypass, but was still able to undertake a UK tour and belt out a tune to the delight of all his fans. This was no doubt a result of a constitution that could withstand the strains of marathon dancing for five months at a stretch!

Nick Girdler, Titchfield



We reward the Letter of the Month writer with a copy of a new book. This issue, that's **The Scapegoat: The Brilliant Brief Life of the Duke of Buckingham** by Lucy Hughes-Hallett. Read our review on page 74

Beacon of hope…

Although it's true that Winston Churchill had many flaws, it is also certain that he deserves the title of 'greatest Briton', for saving the nation, and indeed the world, from the most evil regime ever to have existed (*Still the Greatest?*, Christmas).

The Second World War could not have been won without the huge sacrifice made by the Soviet Union and the industrial strength of the US. Yet, had Britain not held the line in 1940–41, victory would have been impossible – certainly for the democracies. The US could not have used the island as a base to assist the Soviets with war materiel after Operation Barbarossa, or for engaging Hitler in 1944.

If Churchill had not existed, the appeasers in the government would have sought an accommodation with the Nazis, which would inevitably have led to our eventual extinction as a democratic nation, and a nightmare for the world. My parents, who lived in London throughout the entire war, always said that Churchill gave them hope, even in the face of the early disasters the country endured before the tide turned.

Colin Bullen, Kent

…or flash in the pan?

I would like to add my contribution to the debate on Churchill. He was only 'great' for a year, 1940–41, when he refused to surrender to Germany and did Britain and the world an immense service by holding out. Before 1940, he had been a soldier who was more interested in writing for the newspapers, a political maverick who was distrusted by all parties, and a self-confessed war lover who was a leading voice in Britain's entry into the First World War. He did speak up against Germany in the 1930s – but so did many others.

He was obsessed with attacking Germany via its 'soft underbelly', which resulted in pointless and costly campaigns in Gallipoli, north Africa and Italy. He tried, initially unsuccessfully, to persuade Roosevelt to join the Second World War, and it is doubtful if the president would have done so had Hitler not declared war on the United States.

After the US entered the war, it directed grand strategy from the west from then on. Churchill's role was all but over – and, as peacetime PM after the war, he was hopeless.

Mike Nadin, Gloucester

Unearned credit

It was interesting to read historians' thoughts on whether Britain should be proud of its past (*Conversation*, Christmas). I've noted a curious phenomenon of people trying to take credit for our past, with comments such as 'we went through the Blitz' or 'we survived the trenches' as if they were there in person.

I recall being in a French restaurant and overhearing a young Englishman tell the French waiter that "you should be grateful – without us, you would be speaking German". Some politicians even argued that the Second World War should be used in Brexit negotiations, as if the EU needed to repay a debt – although it was not stated what our current leaders did to liberate France in 1944. Equally, those who take credit will not take blame for the bad bits. No one boasts that we took part in the slave trade or massacred people at Amritsar in 1919, for instance.

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GETTY IMAGES

Of course, we British citizens can be partly proud and partly critical of what our ancestors did in the past, and we must especially thank and remember the wartime generations for their courage and their sacrifice. But it would be wrong to boast of past achievements as if they were our own. And as historians, we must take a more detached and constructive approach.
Keith Nevols, Kent

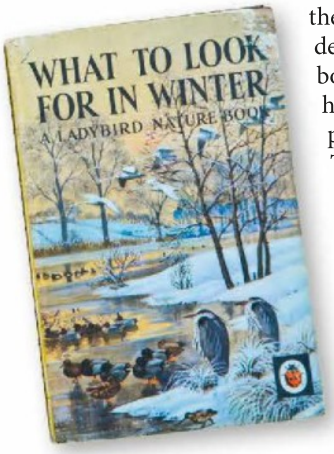
The Ladybird legacy

I so enjoyed Michael Wood waxing lyrical about Ladybird books (December), particularly [1959's] *What to Look for in Winter*. I still have my copy, as well as those covering the other seasons. They inspire particular nostalgia because I remember, in my first years of teaching in the early 1970s, taking my after-school book club of enthusiastic 10- and 11-year-old readers to the Ladybird factory in Loughborough. They were fascinated to see those familiar, engaging pictures rolling off the press.

I still have a collection of many of the Ladybird history titles, too, which were an education in themselves. I would read the book telling the story of the gunpowder plot to my class, who were spellbound by its events, celebrating their history with bonfires, fireworks and 'a penny for the guy' on the street corner. The account of Captain Scott and his heroic team's journey to the Antarctic was also a favourite.

I hope my former pupils, who will now be in their mid-50s, remember Ladybird and all that it taught them with the fondness I now feel. Thank you for the reminder, Michael!
Carol Hurley, Wombourne

A title from the Ladybird series exploring the seasons. Michael Wood's column on the classic children's books prompted fond memories for reader Carol Hurley



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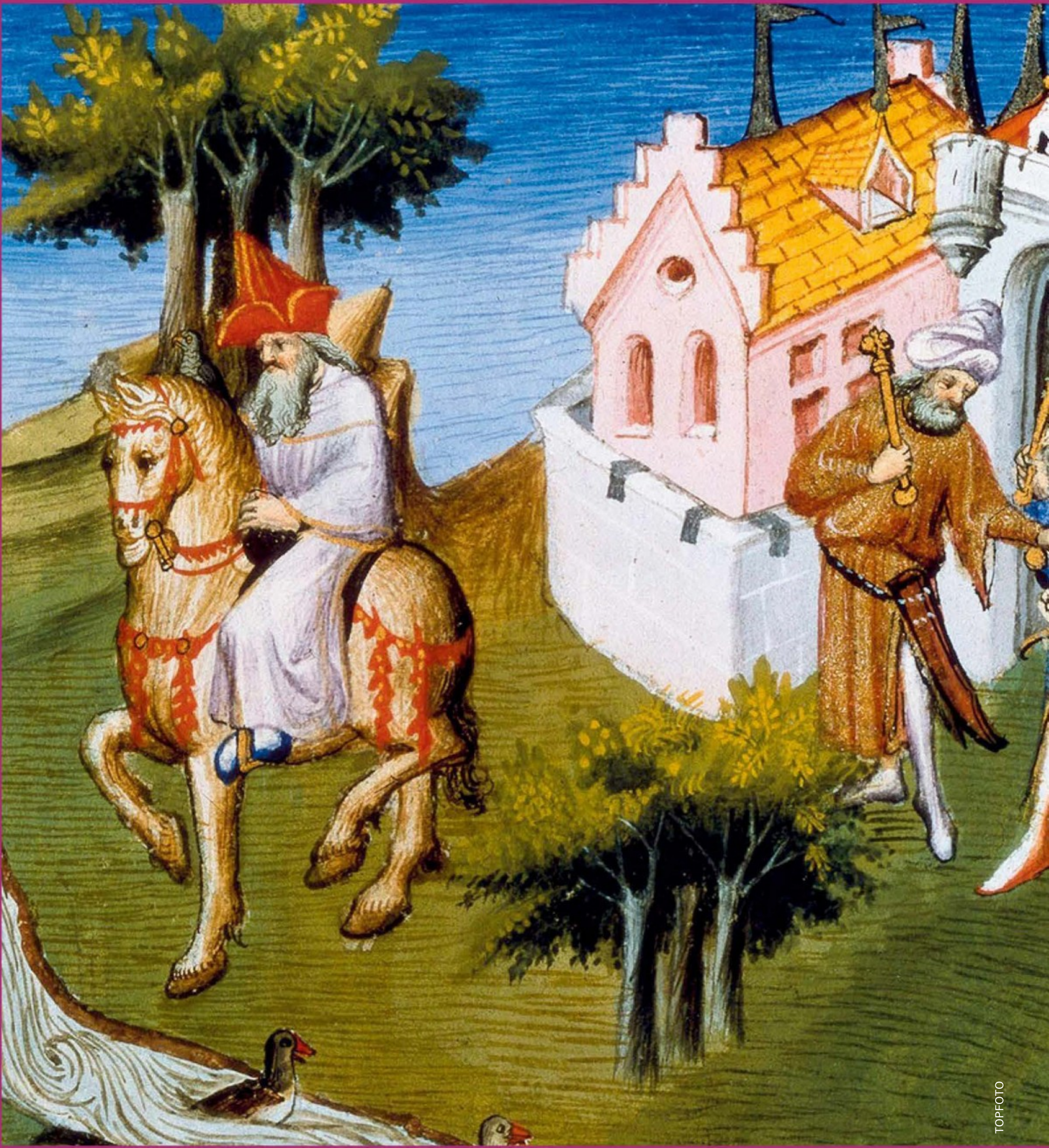

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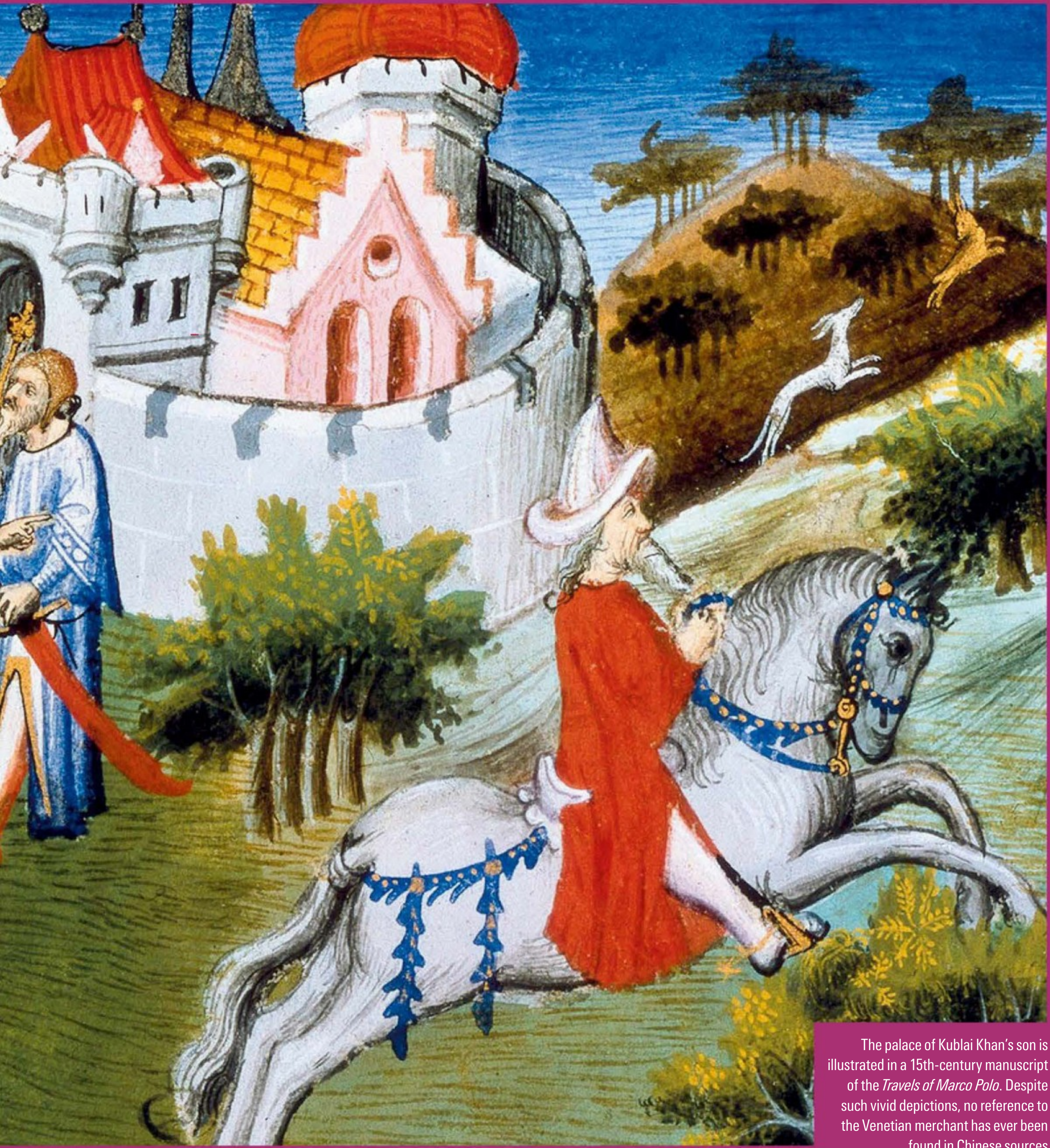
Land of make believe?



The palace of Kublai Khan's son is illustrated in a 15th-century manuscript of the *Travels of Marco Polo*. Despite such vivid depictions, no reference to the Venetian merchant has ever been found in Chinese sources

Marco Polo's adventures in Asia earned him everlasting fame. But are his accounts of his travels essentially works of fiction? **Peter Jackson** asks if we can trust this medieval travel-writing superstar

Life had taken a turn for the worse for Rustichello of Pisa. In the dying days of the 13th century, the Italian romance writer found himself locked up as a prisoner of war. Over the previous years, Rustichello had made something of a name for himself as the first author to pen an Arthurian romance in Italian. Yet he had got himself captured while fighting for his native city in the Genoese-Pisan War. And so here he was, denied his freedom, languishing in a Genoese jail.

Yet if Rustichello was searching for some sort of salvation, he didn't have to look far. It lay in the identity of the curious individual with whom he shared his cell. That man began telling Rustichello an extraordinary story. It was a tale of an epic journey to China – of encounters with unimaginably rich and powerful rulers, of strange and exotic lands, of brushes with creatures that would make your heart race and skin crawl. And it triggered in Rustichello an idea.

The Italian writer soon saw the potential of turning the memoirs of his well-travelled cellmate into a book. And so he set about writing them up in the default language of medieval romance: Old French, but with a smattering of Italian. The result – *Travels of Marco Polo*, or *Le Divisament du Monde* ('The Diverse Parts of the World'), as it was originally known – was Rustichello's crowning achievement. And it would turn his cellmate, Marco Polo, into one of the most famous figures of the entire Middle Ages.

Strange new world

Le Divisament transformed perceptions of the far east across medieval Europe, introducing generations of readers to a world that they could barely conceive of, let alone visit. But look beyond its remarkable impact, and how much credence should we give to the text that Rustichello committed to paper following his incarceration with Polo? How useful is the book in understanding life in Asia – especially China – in the Middle Ages? In short, can we really trust Marco Polo's word?

To answer this question, we first need to untangle what kind of book *Le Divisament* was, and what it aimed to do. At its heart is the tale of how – in the early 1270s, at the age of just 17 – Marco embarked on an extraordinary journey to China with two other Polos: his father, Niccolò, and his uncle Maffeo. The trio, so *Le Divisament* tells us, travelled to the far east at the end of a superlative period of imperial expansion triggered by the rise of the great Mongol leader Genghis Khan (c1162–1227). So formidable was Genghis as both a warlord and a conqueror that the empire he established would, at its peak, extend all the way from eastern Europe to the Sea of Japan.

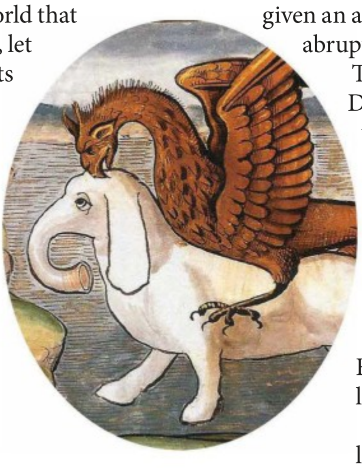
However, by the time Marco and his companions arrived on the scene, the Mongol empire had split into a number of virtually autonomous states – and the age of rapid expansion was all but over. Only to the east – in the dominion of Genghis's grandson the Great Khan Kublai – were major wars of conquest being fought, notably when, in 1279, Kublai extinguished the rule of southern China's indigenous Song dynasty emperors.

Sadly, the original text of *Le Divisament,* describing the world that greeted Marco and his companions on their arrival in China, is lost. But there's enough consistency between the various manuscripts to indicate that what we're reading is essentially the same book. However, this is not necessarily the book you might expect. For all that its English title talks of Polo's travels, *Le Divisament* is emphatically *not* a travelogue. Rather, it is a description of the known world, based loosely around Marco's experiences.

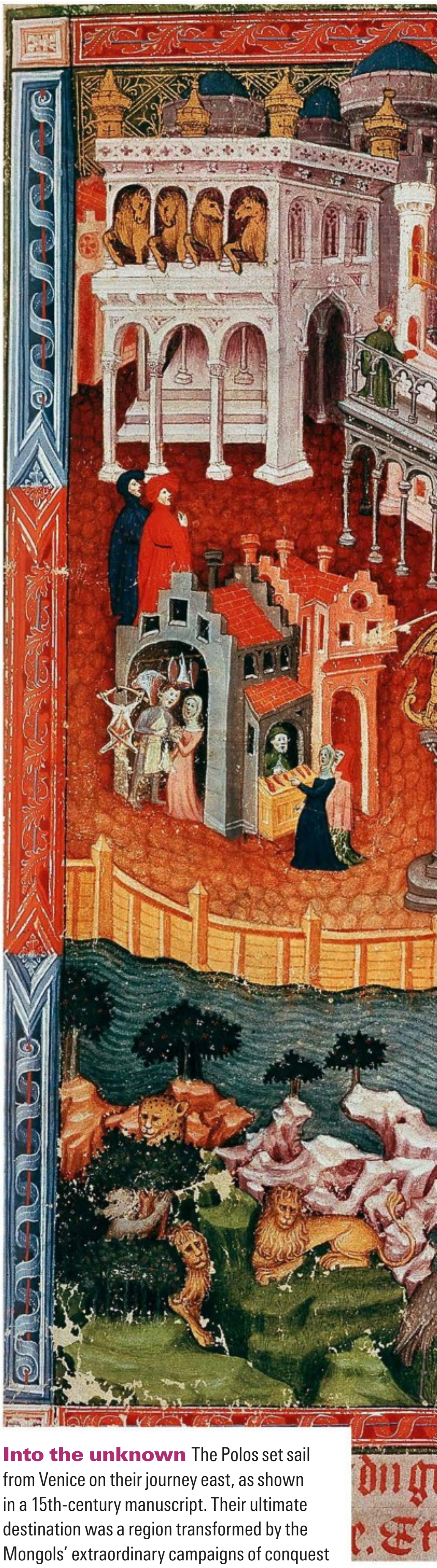
As descriptions go, it's often an unsatisfactory one. The text is rambling and discursive. It is also given to maddeningly artificial changes of direction, such as when it embarks on a description of the Black Sea, before – having recalled that Marco has already given an account of this – heading off abruptly in another direction.

There are other irritations. Despite repeatedly promising to confine himself to describing lands he had seen – and to distinguish personal observation from hearsay – the book includes regions, such as the coast of east Africa, that it's highly unlikely Marco ever visited. For the most part, there is little sense of an itinerary.

And yet, despite these limitations, there are extraordinary details to be found. *Le Divisament* states that, having arrived at the court of Kublai Khan, Marco swiftly made a



Tall stories A griffin attacks an elephant in the *Travels of Marco Polo*. Do such fantastical images undermine the credibility of the entire book?



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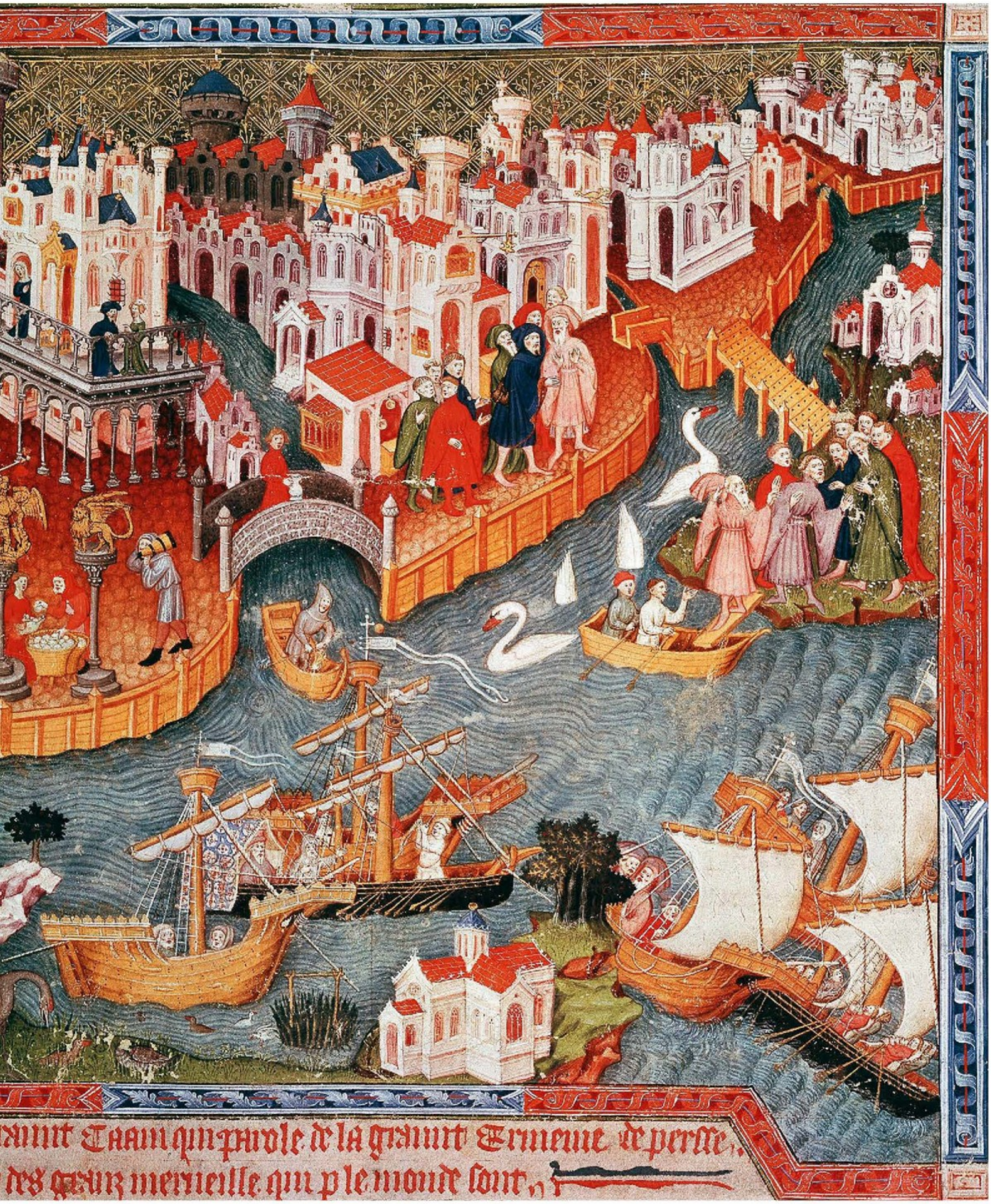
Into the unknown The Polos set sail from Venice on their journey east, as shown in a 15th-century manuscript. Their ultimate destination was a region transformed by the Mongols' extraordinary campaigns of conquest

How Kublai Khan transformed China

We explored the Mongol leader's extraordinary life and legacy on our podcast recently: *historyextra.com/kublai-khan-pod*


raunt Caan qui parole de la graunt Ermenie de perse,
des granz merveille qui p le monde sont

TIMELINE

Marco Polo's life in travels

c1254 **Marco Polo is born** in Venice to a wealthy merchant. His mother dies when he is young and he is raised by extended family

1269 Marco's father, Niccolò, and uncle Maffeo – both merchants – return to Venice after having visited the court of the **Mongol leader Kublai Khan**

1271 Niccolò, Maffeo and Marco set out on a **new expedition**. It's believed that their journey east takes them through **Iran, Afghanistan** and on to **China**

c1275 According to Marco's account of his travels, the Polos arrive at **Kublai Khan's summer capital of Shangdu** in modern-day north-eastern China

c1275–c1292 In Marco's words, he is appointed to serve as Kublai's foreign emissary and spends the next **17 years travelling extensively across China**

c1292 The Polos escort a Mongol princess to Persia, visiting **modern-day Vietnam and Sri Lanka** en route. They eventually return to Venice

c1298 Marco is captured by Venice's enemies the Genoese. His cellmate in Genoa – **an author called Rustichello** – begins writing up (and embellishing) Marco's memoirs

c1300 Copies of Rustichello's book *The Travels of Marco Polo* proliferate. It will help make Marco arguably **the most celebrated explorer of the Middle Ages**

8 January 1324 After living out the final years of his life in his native Venice, **Marco Polo dies**

Lasting fame: Marco Polo shown in a 19th-century commemorative medal

Marco describes a giant bird called the *ruc*, which could drop elephants from a great height

favourable impression on the Mongol ruler, who recruited him into his service. The Great Khan apparently despatched Marco as his representative on missions within China – and, in a number of cases, around the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean. The Venetian was often charged with securing exotica for Kublai's collection, such as the alms-bowl of the Buddha, and drafting interesting reports on these journeys.

Marco's accounts of his interactions with the Great Khan are remarkable. Yet arguably more astonishing to his contemporaries were his descriptions of the marvels he had witnessed on his travels. Some of these are undoubtedly in the tradition of the fantastic – take, for example, the giant bird called the *ruc*, which could drop elephants from a great height. Many others, however, use exaggeration – and explore the remarkable *within* nature – rather than employ pure fabrication. So we read of a king of Champa (the southern part of present-day Vietnam) who has 326 children, and of a giant ruby in the possession of the king of Ceylon, a jewel Marco allegedly saw at first hand.

Marco also describes huge Chinese ships, and invites us to marvel at the enormous populations of Chinese cities – not to mention the vast number of islands to be found in the Indian Ocean and the China Sea. The book sings the praises of a great island lying due east of China, named Cipingu, which abounds in gold and pearls. That island is now known as Japan – and Marco's book was the earliest western source to mention it.

Marco (or Rustichello) seems to take a positive pleasure in demolishing common misconceptions about the east back in western Europe. The mythical salamander is, he explains, not a living, breathing creature but asbestos, an incombustible substance mined from earth. The corpses sold in India as dead pygmies are, in fact, dried monkeys. The unicorn is identified as a rhinoceros – not at all the kind of creature, the book assures us, that allows itself to be ensnared by virgins.

Riding to the rescue?

So Marco witnessed some extraordinary sights on his travels – and he was all too happy to share them with his readership. Yet, to return to the question I posed earlier, can we trust Marco's word? When he lectured his fellow Europeans on the intricacies of life in the far east, how far was he dipping into the well of lived experience, and how much was make-believe?

Certain details in the *Le Divisament* are undeniably questionable on historical grounds. Prominent among these is the claim that the Polos rendered invaluable assistance to Kublai's forces in the capture of the city of Xiangyang. This is known to have occurred in 1273, a year or two *prior* to the Venetians' arrival in China. In fact, Chinese sources give Muslim siege experts the credit for assisting Kublai's assault on the city.

This is not the only passage that stretches credulity. Niccolò and Maffeo had already travelled to China (in the early 1260s), and *Le Divisament* tells us that, during this first visit, they had been commissioned by Kublai to bring back to China 100 Christian missionaries together with some holy oil from Jerusalem. The book also claims that Pope Gregory X appointed the Polos as his ambassadors to the Mongol Ilkhan in Iran following a meeting in Acre. Both are great stories; neither is likely to be true.

Many historians have also questioned the credibility of Marco's co-author. Rustichello was known from his other writing to have been a habitual name-dropper – once claiming, for example, that the Lord Edward (the future King Edward I of England) had lent him a book of Arthurian romance.

Such scepticism has a long history. *Le Divisament* started making waves across western Europe from as early as the second decade of the 14th century – and it wasn't long before rave reviews were being counter-balanced by the voicing of doubts. In particular, Marco's contemporaries seem to have struggled with the contrast between the received image of the Mongols – a people customarily portrayed in 13th-century Europe as nomadic barbarians – and the book's depiction of the wealth and impressive organisation of Kublai's empire. In short, while Europeans could accept the existence of a sophisticated polity in the east, the idea that it was presided over by the Mongols was far more difficult to swallow.

Europeans were all too willing to lap up the fictional story of the Christian king Prester John, who, according to the traditional legend, ruled over a kingdom in the east.

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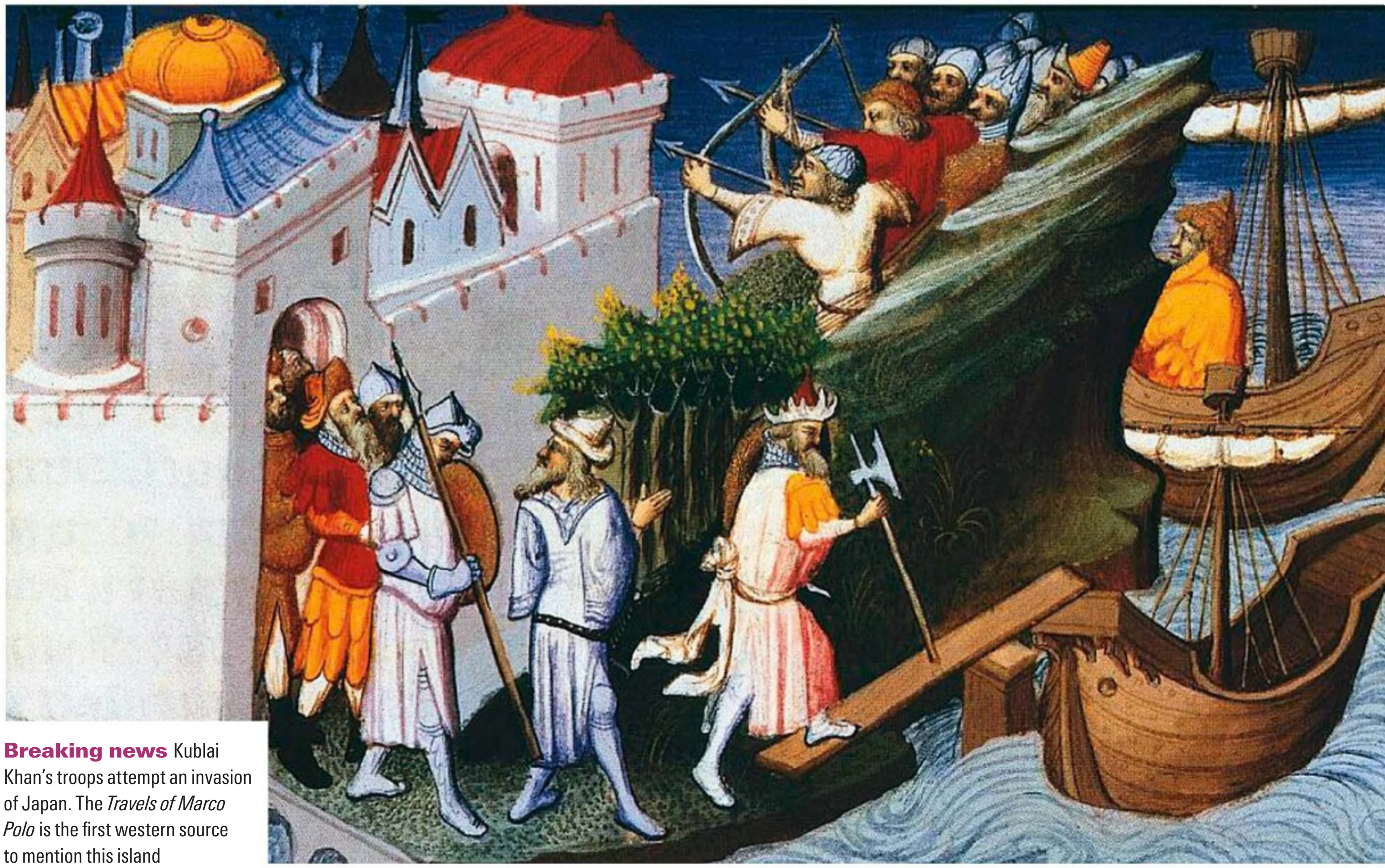
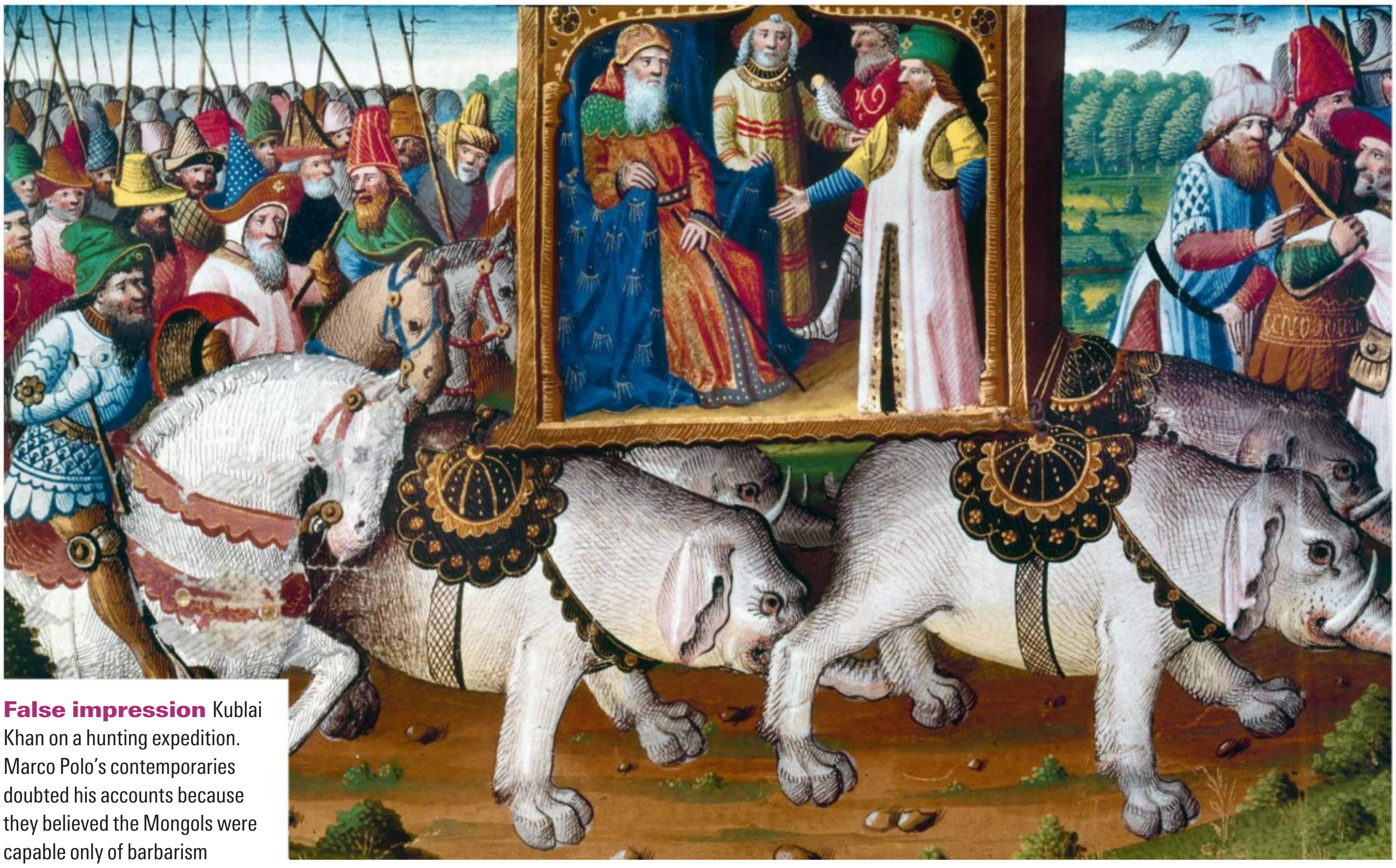
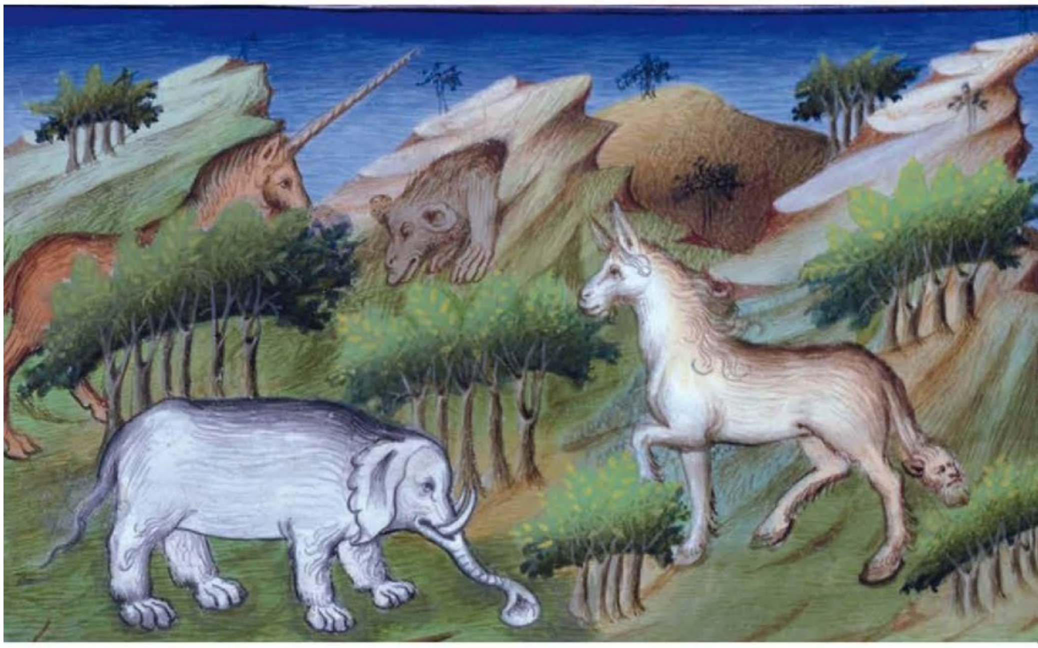


Breaking news Kublai Khan's troops attempt an invasion of Japan. The *Travels of Marco Polo* is the first western source to mention this island



False impression Kublai Khan on a hunting expedition. Marco Polo's contemporaries doubted his accounts because they believed the Mongols were capable only of barbarism

ALAMY/TOPFOTO



Fantastic beasts A 15th-century depiction of a unicorn, which Marco Polo expected to see on his travels. Instead he found the real-life creature to be "entirely different from what we fancied", namely a rhinoceros

TOPFOTO

However, the version of Prester John's life in *Le Divisament* – which described him as a minor prince overthrown, paradoxically, by Genghis Khan with the help of astrologers – was much less to their liking.

Modern critics are more troubled by what seem like glaring omissions from the Venetian's text than his depiction of the Mongols. Marco's failure to mention the Great Wall shouldn't be held against him because, contrary to popular belief, the continuous structure that exists today had not yet been built. But it is more difficult to account for his silence regarding tea-drinking, the use of fingerprinting for authentication of documents, or the way Chinese women bound their feet. Other critics have pointed to the fact that, although Marco is at great pains to depict himself as a highly valued agent of the Great Khan, no reference to him has been found in Chinese sources.

In the eyes of some modern academics, such omissions fundamentally undermine Marco's entire story. One has even gone as far as to claim that he never made it further east than the Black Sea.

Do I agree with this assessment? No. In my opinion, there is nothing intrinsically improbable about a Venetian finding employment in China under the Great Khan. Kublai is known to have recruited men of diverse talents to serve him. In fact, this seems to have been a trait of Mongol rulers: by 1289, the Ilkhans were employing Italians as envoys, interpreters and mercenaries.

Marco's maritime voyages on the Great Khan's behalf fit easily within the burst of diplomatic activity that took Kublai's representatives to Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and peninsular India between 1278 and 1294. One explanation for the Polos' absence from Chinese sources is that they would simply have been classed in the same category as all the many other foreign agents drawn from lands to the west of China. So numerous were these visitors that the Chinese had two terms for them: *xiyu* ('westerners') or *semu* ('people of various nations').

What of the accusation that Marco grossly inflated the role he played in Kublai's court and exaggerated his adventures? Even his most vigorous of defenders would have to concede that it's highly likely that he did both. Yet he'd hardly be the first traveller to be guilty of such a 'crime'. This doesn't mean that he didn't have *any* adventures at all.

Maybe the best way to make any significant headway in the quest to determine the veracity of Marco's writings is to locate documentary evidence to support his presence in the Mongol world. Unfortunately, this is in vanishingly short supply. Marco's later life, in which he became a successful merchant, is comparatively well documented. But firm proof of his travels remains elusive.

In fact, the nearest we get to documentary evidence is his uncle Maffeo's will. This refers to "the three tablets of gold that were from the magnificent Chan of the Tartars", a term that could mean either the Great Khan or one of his relatives. It is presumably one of these tablets that is mentioned in an inventory of Marco's property drawn up decades after his death, during a dispute among his notoriously litigious kinsfolk.

The Polos were true pioneers. It would be 30 years before the great age of Italian settlement in China got under way

Blazing a trail

Ultimately, given the difficulties of the sources, and the doubts swirling around Marco's account, perhaps we have to make an admission – that the most remarkable thing about the Polos' travels is not so much that they happened, but *when* they happened. Their long journey to China fell several years before an Italian presence in Asia is even documented. It would be up to 30 years before the great age of Italian settlement in China's coastal cities would get under way.

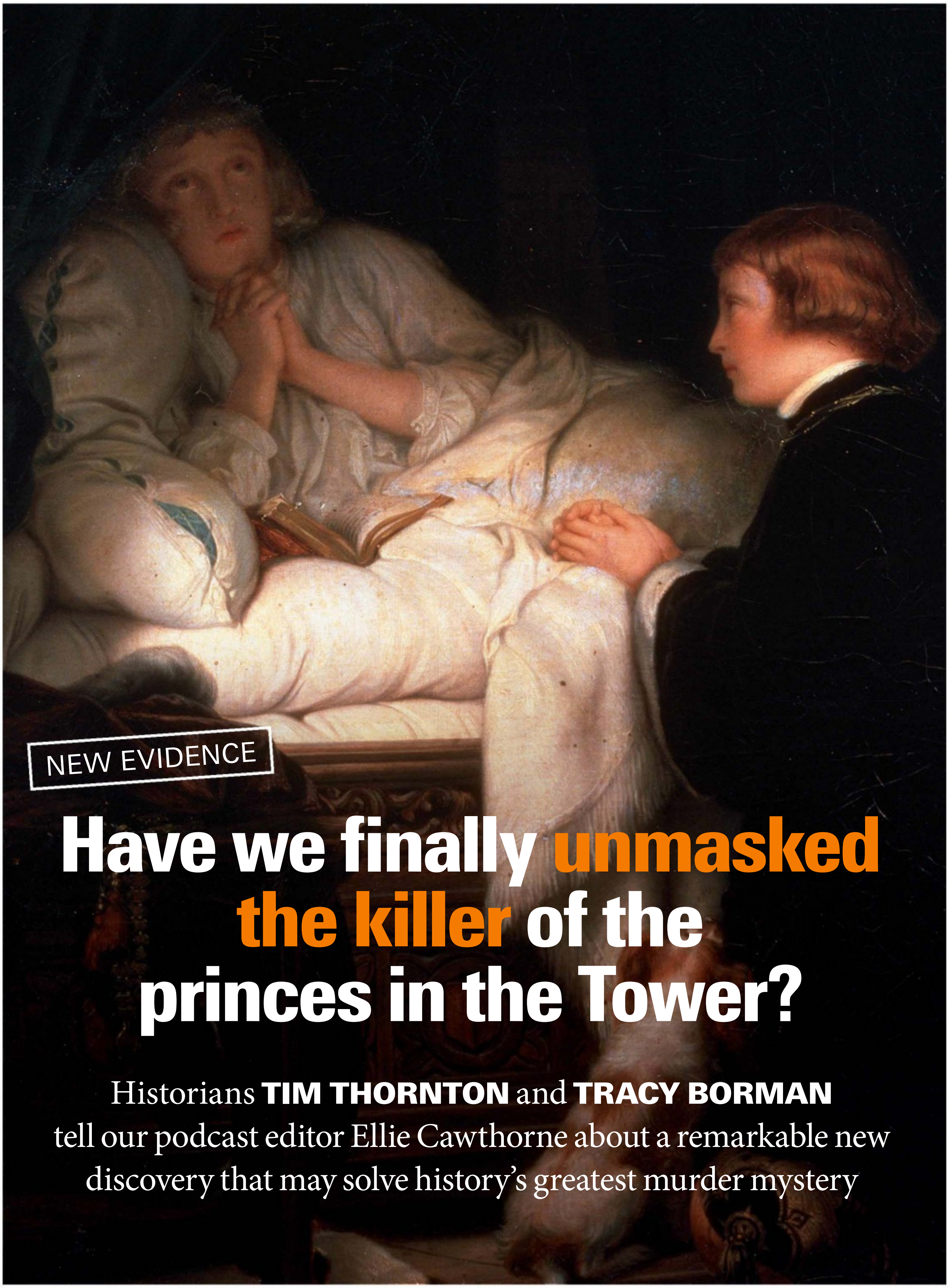
That makes the Polos true pioneers. In the 13th century, Venetian and Genoese traders established footholds in Crimea and the chief camp-cities of Mongol princes in Iran and in the western steppes. Yet no one ventured nearly as far east as Marco and his two relatives. Is it any wonder, then, that generations of western Europeans read his accounts of his travels with slack-jawed wonder?

As the 14th century went on, European voyages to China began to decline. Then, in 1368, a native Ming dynasty less ready to welcome foreign merchants kicked out the Mongol rulers from China.

But the western imagination never lost sight of the image of a fabulously wealthy empire lying to the east. When Christopher Columbus embarked on his transatlantic journeys in the 1490s, which led to the 'discovery' of the New World, he was seeking an alternative route to 'Cathay'. Before he boarded his ship on one of his famous voyages, Columbus packed an indispensable guide. It was a copy of Marco Polo's book. H

Peter Jackson is emeritus professor of medieval history at Keele University. His books include *The Mongols and the West* (Routledge, 2018)

Marco Polo will be the topic of an upcoming episode of Greg Jenner's comedy-history podcast *You're Dead to Me* on BBC Radio 4 and BBC Sounds



NEW EVIDENCE

Have we finally unmasked the killer of the princes in the Tower?

Historians **TIM THORNTON** and **TRACY BORMAN** tell our podcast editor Ellie Cawthorne about a remarkable new discovery that may solve history's greatest murder mystery

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Ellie Cawthorne The fate of the princes in the Tower is one of the most controversial episodes in British history. And, Tim, you've made some discoveries that could potentially give us a new understanding of what happened to the princes more than five centuries ago. So what initially drew you to this story?

Tim Thornton You're right: the princes' fate is one of the greatest of all historical mysteries, and I've been investigating it all of my career, which I'm terrified to admit is now about 30 years!

Previous attempts to resolve the mystery have focused on the period leading up to the moment the princes vanished after being moved to the Tower of London by Richard III. For most historians, the summer of 1483 – when they disappeared from view – is when this story ends. But five or six years ago, I began to look at the case through a different lens – to see that summer not as where the story *ends*, but where it *begins*.

One of the key sources we have on the disappearance is a detailed account written around 30 years later by Thomas More. He will be a familiar name to people interested in the Tudor era, and his account is the first that identifies how the deed was done and who was to blame. More claims that two individuals – Miles Forest and John Dighton – carried out the murder for an agent of Richard III called Sir James Tyrrell.

When I began looking at More's account, I was working against a background of very great scepticism about his story. Many people believed it was a simple exercise in propaganda on behalf of the Tudors – Richard's enemies who were on the throne at the time. Other people have suggested that More was more interested in literary flair and political philosophy than historical accuracy; he was writing an abstract account of how a country can fall into tyranny.

But a couple of years ago, I produced a paper which suggested that, far from being imaginary individuals or random characters drawn into the story willy-nilly by More, Miles Forest and John Dighton were real people. Most compellingly, I found that when Thomas More was likely preparing his account of this period, he was on embassy in Bruges. And the man carrying messages from that embassy back to England was one Miles Forest – son of the man More implicated in the murders, who shared his name. There is even a 1515 letter that has Thomas More's signature at the foot, and Miles Forest's name at the head. Now that is an extraordinary connection.

More's story had previously been dismissed as propaganda or abstract literature. But my research started to connect More very directly to people who'd been around at the time of the disappearance of the princes.

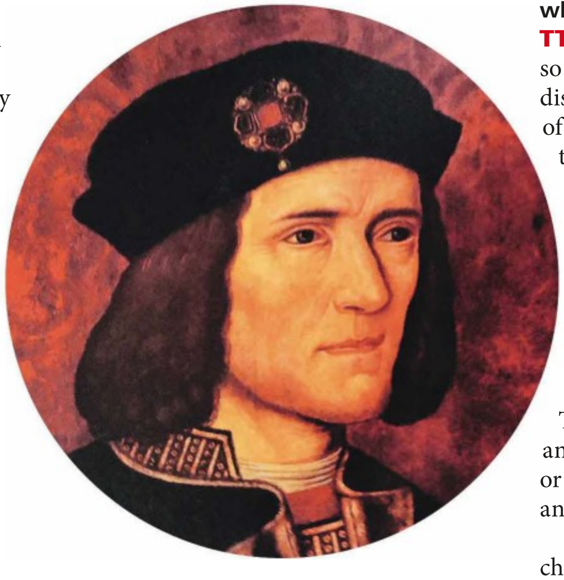
> **"I began to see the summer in which the princes disappeared not as the moment where the story ends, but where it begins"**

IN CONTEXT: THE MYSTERY OF THE PRINCES IN THE TOWER

The princes in the Tower were the young sons and heirs of King Edward IV: Edward V and his younger brother, Richard, Duke of York. At the time of his death in April 1483, Edward IV's sons were aged 12 and 9. As Edward V was too young to rule, his uncle Richard of Gloucester was appointed Lord Protector, to take the reins until his nephew was old enough.

Shortly afterwards, Richard placed the boys in the Tower of London. At first this didn't seem overly suspicious, but over the summer of 1483 they were seen less and less. By the end of that summer, they were never seen again. At the time it was assumed that the boys had been quietly murdered on the orders of their uncle, who had by then declared them illegitimate and made himself King Richard III. But nobody knew for sure.

A couple of hundred years later, in 1674, the skeletons of two children were discovered underneath a staircase in the Tower, close to where the princes had been kept. These bones were reburied by Charles II in Westminster Abbey, where they remain to this day. They were briefly exhumed in the 1930s, but the analysis was not conclusive. And so the mystery has continued.



Unfairly maligned?

Defenders of Richard III – shown here in a 16th-century portrait – have long argued that he's been the victim of Tudor propaganda

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Tell us about your recent discovery and what it adds to this picture

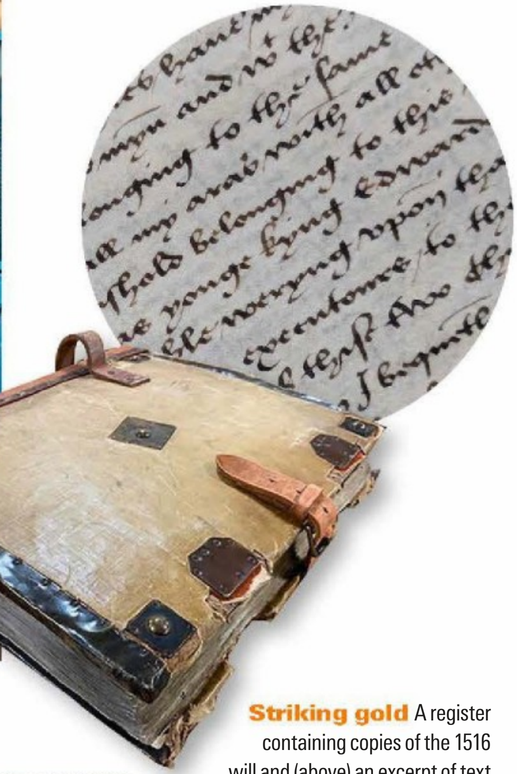
TT One of the things that makes this story so compelling is that the princes really did disappear without a trace. Until the discovery of bones in 1674, there were no meaningful traces of the boys. No clothing is reputed to survive from them, nor any weapons, jewellery or other possessions.

But I've discovered a will from 1516 – around the time that Thomas More was writing – which mentions a gold chain that belonged to Edward V, the elder of the two princes. In this period, chains were very valuable and significant items. They would be made of precious metal and jewels, and usually incorporated badges or symbols to express the owner's identity and loyalties.

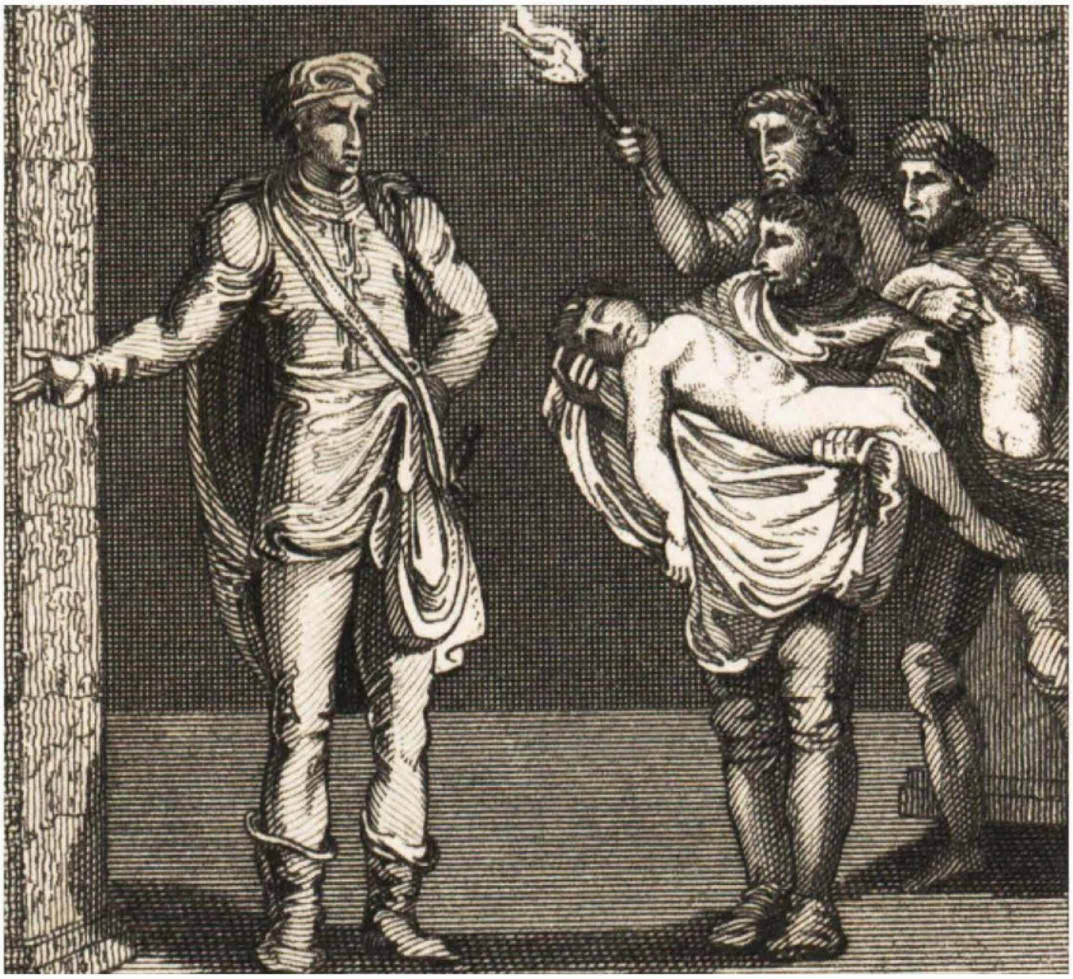
What makes this really exciting is who the chain belonged to. The will shows that the chain was in the hands of Lady Margaret Capell – a wealthy and influential woman, and widow of a former Lord Mayor of London. But most significantly, Margaret

Does Richard III have blood on his hands?
Listen to the full version of our interview with Tim Thornton and Tracy Borman at *historyextra.com/podcast*

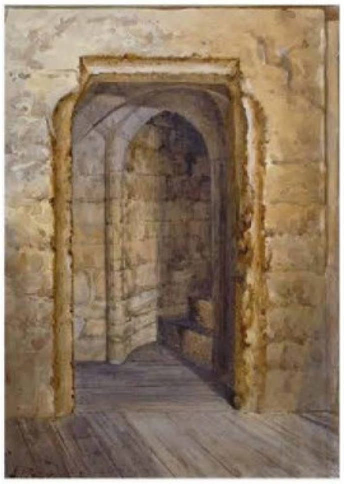
Open book Tim Thornton (left), presenter Jason Watkins and Tracy Borman, pictured with the crucial 1516 will during filming for a Channel 5 documentary that explores the story



Striking gold A register containing copies of the 1516 will and (above) an excerpt of text mentioning Edward V's gold chain, which made its way into the possession of Sir James Tyrrell's sister-in-law Lady Margaret Capell



Hidden horror Sir James Tyrrell (left) oversees the disposal of the princes' bodies in an 1836 engraving. According to Thomas More, Tyrrell – an agent of Richard III – masterminded this most notorious of royal crimes



Death stair A Victorian painting of the staircase leading to the room in the Tower in which the princes were purportedly murdered

COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES/© CHANNEL 5 BROADCASTING LIMITED-LION TELEVISION/GETTY IMAGES

was also the sister-in-law of Sir James Tyrrell, the man identified by Thomas More as the orchestrator of the princes' murder.

Can you tell us more about Sir James Tyrrell?

Tracy Borman For many years Tyrrell has been seen as a bit of a pantomime villain. But first and foremost, he was Richard III's right-hand man – an enforcer, if you like. He had a military background and was an influential figure at court. What also comes across very clearly from the records is that he was a man of ambition, but also intense loyalty.

The other notable thing about Tyrrell is that he was later implicated in a treasonous plot against the Tudors and placed in the Tower. And according to More, during his imprisonment, Tyrrell actually confessed to the murders of the princes.

One explanation for this new discovery could be that Tyrrell had the princes killed, took Edward's chain and passed it on to his relative. But are there any other explanations for how this chain could have ended up in his sister-in-law's possession?

TT I absolutely acknowledge that there are other ways that this chain might have reached Margaret Capell. I think the likelihood of it simply being discarded somewhere and then picked up by the Capells is very small. But it's entirely credible that the princes' possessions were dispersed in a more neutral way. It might have been that, in the aftermath of Edward V's deposition, his most valuable possessions were sold off to wealthy Londoners like Margaret's husband, Sir William Capell.

But for me, the possession of the chain by a connection of James Tyrrell does add to the suspicions around what had happened to the boys before the chain changed hands.

It's also worth noting that the Capells' lawyer in the 1510s was a man called John More – the father of (you guessed it) Thomas More. So not only have we identified a physical object from the princes that survived in the hands of the sister-in-law of the man that More says organised the murders, but we've also established another connection with More himself.

People have spent years poring over every single detail of this case. Why do you think that nobody has come across this before?

TT My suspicion is that, because of the scepticism around the credibility of More's account, the incentives to explore his claims were diminished. What I've done is not particularly revolutionary. In exploring members of Tyrrell's family, all I've done is take a closer look at the connections of one of the prime suspects.

Last sighting The princes disappeared in the summer of 1483 after being moved to the Tower of London

> **"** I think the balance of probabilities is shifting quite significantly to suggest that Richard III was responsible for the boys' deaths **"**

How do you think people are going to react to this discovery? Especially those who believe Richard was not responsible for his nephews' disappearance

TB As someone who has followed the story of the princes so closely throughout my whole career, I would say that this is undoubtedly the most significant discovery, not just in recent years, but in my entire tenure as a historian. I haven't heard anything more compelling in this case than Tim's latest discovery. This is the next chapter and it's a hugely significant one.

That said, I know how emotive this subject is. It's a deeply divisive issue. Richard still has an army of loyal supporters today, who may question this discovery and stick with their original beliefs. I have always kept an open mind on this, but it's a shame that there are these two camps and you can't just be somewhere in the middle. I'm chief curator at Historic Royal Palaces, and we will absolutely continue to encourage visitors to the Tower of London to make up their own minds about what happened. But for me as a historian, this has really changed my perception.

TT I absolutely respect the views of those who passionately defend Richard. I understand why they do it. But I think this is a good test case for the way that historians work.

One of the things that people often say to me is that we have not proven this case beyond reasonable doubt. They apply the same standards of proof that you would expect in a court of law today. But as historians, I think we need to try and explain that when you're working on a topic like this, it's almost impossible to achieve levels of proof beyond reasonable doubt.

We can't interview suspects. We can't undertake forensic investigations at crime scenes. We have to work with the limited body of evidence that remains. What historians must do instead is to work on a balance of probabilities, and I think that's entirely reasonable. It recognises that, on most historical topics, we almost inevitably have imperfect evidence.

Why is there so little evidence to draw on in this case?

TT There were a lot of people at the time and immediately afterwards who didn't want there to be any evidence of the events in question. You've got to remember that Tudor England was full of people who were deeply compromised by their involvement in horrific crimes in the previous decades of civil conflict. I draw parallels with Europe after 1945. And in situations like that, there isn't always an incentive for people to pick over the past in huge detail.

So where do you think this latest discovery leaves us?

TT I think the balance of probabilities is shifting quite significantly to suggest that Richard was responsible for the boys' deaths, and that we have likely murderers in Tyrrell, Forest and Dighton.

TB I agree. When added up with the other elements of this case, I think that Tim's research – particularly this latest discovery – brings us quite significantly closer to what really happened to the princes in the Tower. ◼

Tracy Borman is an author and chief curator of Historic Royal Palaces. **Tim Thornton** is professor of history and deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Huddersfield. You can read his new research in full at *onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-229X.13430*

Tim Thornton has revealed his discoveries in a new Channel 5 documentary, **Princes in the Tower: A Damning Discovery**. Catch up with that on My5

ALAMY

WHO WAS THE GREATEST US PRESIDENT?

With Donald Trump set to be inaugurated as the 47th president, we asked seven historians to nominate their choice for the most accomplished American leader

DREAMSTIME/GETTY IMAGES

George Washington

■ IN OFFICE 1789–97 ■ NO PARTY AFFILIATION

In 1789, the newly independent nation desperately needed a leader who would put the good of the republic before personal power. And, in its first president, argues **Thomas Kidd**, that's exactly what it got

George Washington was the first president in US history – and I'm nominating him as the best, too. I am basing this on his success as a leader, his ability to negotiate conflict in his administration, and most importantly the example he set for future presidents.

Americans at the time of the Revolutionary War were enamoured with the ideal of the virtuous republican leader, in the model of the ancient Roman general Cincinnatus. Washington was no perfect man, of course, and like many elite southern Americans he was a slaveholder. But in politics he came the closest to manifesting the republican ideal of any American president.

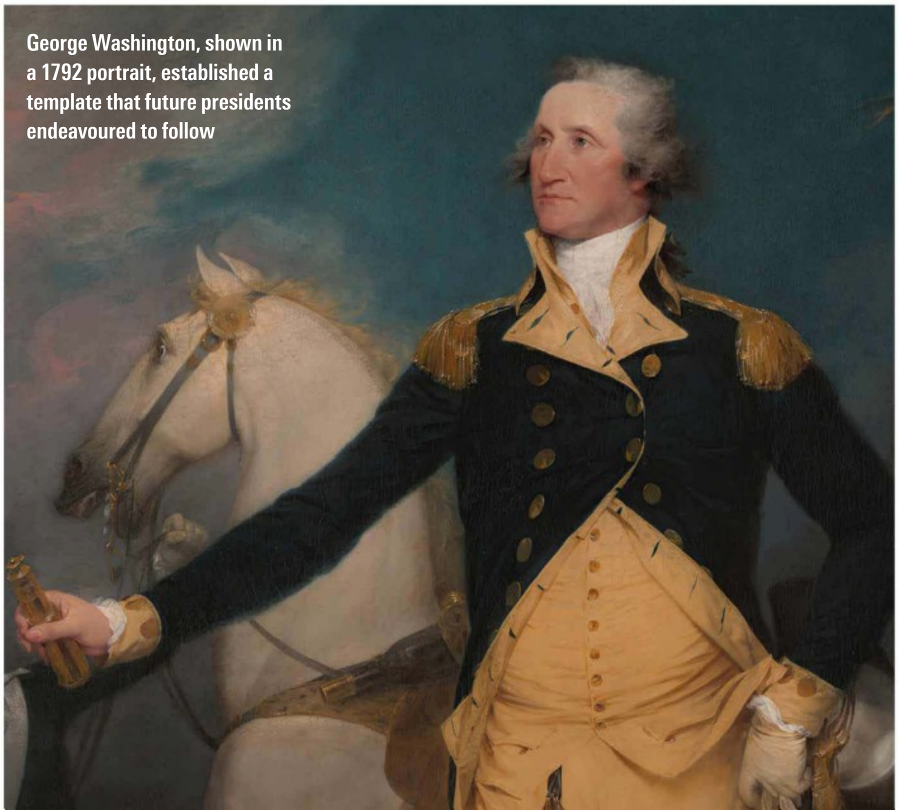
Washington became president after serving as the commander of the American Continental Army during the Revolutionary War. His leadership of the army was not uniformly positive, but his tenacity ultimately led to a successful outcome in the conflict with Britain. Many suspected he might simply remain in the position as a kind of benevolent American autocrat, but he resigned from the army in late 1783, returning to his Mount Vernon home in Virginia.

Befitting the respect that he commanded, Washington was chosen to preside over the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where the US Constitution was drafted. Then he became the first president of the US to be elected under that Constitution in 1789, in a unanimous vote of the electoral college.

Washington dealt with major political conflicts in his administration, especially between the treasury secretary, Alexander Hamilton, and secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, who bitterly disagreed over economic policy and the direction of the new republic. Washington was largely (if not completely) able to rise above the partisan bickering, and always believed that the republic and its leaders needed to manifest consensus for the public good. He assiduously reached out to minority religious groups, such as Jews, to assure them of their place in the republic.

Washington was not constitutionally required to step down after his second term, but he did so once again to manifest the ideal of the public servant who did not want or need to hold onto power indefinitely.

Thomas Kidd's books include *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography of Spirit and Flesh* (Yale, 2022)



George Washington, shown in a 1792 portrait, established a template that future presidents endeavoured to follow

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“Most scholars still rank him the best president.” Lincoln shown in what is believed to be his last portrait, February 1865

Abraham Lincoln

🟥 1861–65 🟦 REPUBLICAN

Boundless self-confidence, an acute political radar and an ability to connect with ordinary people. With qualities like these, is it any wonder, asks **Richard Carwardine**, that Lincoln is widely hailed as the greatest US leader?

In his own era, Abraham Lincoln acquired a mythic status as the ‘Saviour of the United States’ and ‘Great Emancipator’. His death, from a shot fired on Good Friday, saw him canonised as the martyr of the glorious Union. Yet even stripping away the myth, most scholars still rank him the best American president.

When Lincoln took office, seven slaveholding states had already launched a separate Confederacy. Civil war followed. Inexperienced in executive and military leadership, the wartime president faced sustained criticism but drew on formidable self-reliance and indomitable physical strength. He grew in office. Essential to his power were his tenacious nationalism, strategic wisdom, political shrewdness and skill in communication.

The American republic’s unique mission, Lincoln insisted, lay in its ideological freight of liberty and equal opportunity. During the war, his nationalism fused with a deepening religious faith. He came to see that preserving the Union’s cargo demanded emancipating the enslaved, a constitutional amendment ending human bondage, and giving the vote to black soldiers.

Lincoln shrewdly calculated the Union’s strategic priorities: controlling the rich resources of the upper South; securing international support; pursuing a military plan that played to the Union’s strengths while exploiting the enemy’s limitations; and mobilising the human and natural resources of the country.

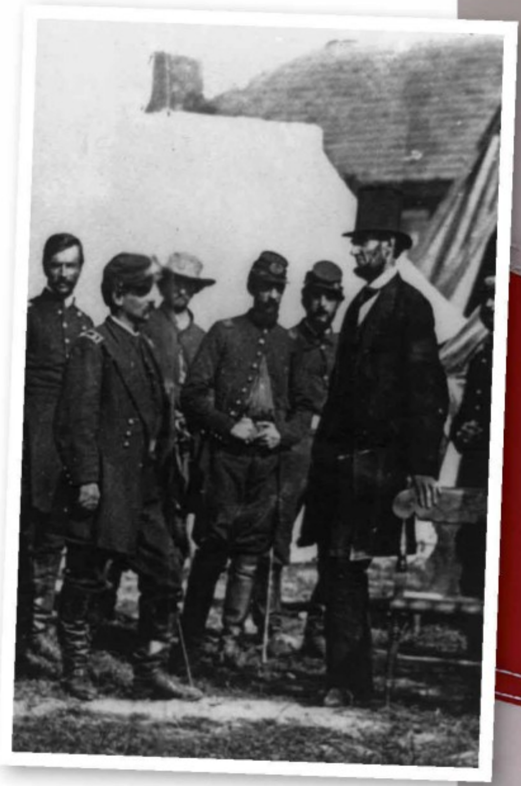
Leadership demanded the deft handling of the levers of power. He controlled his party and broadened the coalition of Union loyalists. He mastered his cabinet and congress, though he was initially less confident with the military. A strong sense of self-worth meant he rarely stood on his dignity. Equally, his mental fortitude – forged through dark passages of depression – gave him resilience in extreme adversity.

Sensitive to public opinion, Lincoln recognised that growing war-weariness threatened the Union cause. In the wiry prose of his memorable public addresses (he used no speechwriter), and in the skilful use of a natural sense of humour, he touched the nerve of ordinary people, believing in their educability through reason.

Lincoln is the only president to have wrestled with civil war. Could any other have done it so well?

……

Richard Carwardine’s new book, *Righteous Strife: How Warring Religious Nationalists Forged Lincoln’s Union* (Alfred A Knopf), is published in January 2025



Abraham Lincoln on the battlefield at Antietam in 1862. Victory in the Civil War has earned him mythic status

Teddy Roosevelt

■ 1901–09 ■ REPUBLICAN

There were dull presidents… and then there was Teddy Roosevelt. **Jennifer Wright** lauds a magnetic character who always had the back of working Americans

If Teddy Roosevelt had not been the president, he would merely have been one of the most interesting men to ever live. The 26th president was a cattle rancher, a taxidermist, a Brazilian explorer, an amateur boxer, a historian who wrote *The Naval War of 1812*, and a Noble Peace Prize winner for his help in bringing an end to the Russo-Japanese War. Admittedly, he did not end the Civil War, like Lincoln. But Lincoln did not take a bullet to the chest and still finish a campaign speech, as Roosevelt did. When Lincoln took a bullet, he famously died.

Prior to being president, Roosevelt was a war hero. He was known for his prominent role with the Rough Riders during the Spanish-American War. This group of volunteer cavalrymen were comprised of anyone who could ride a horse well. That meant that polo-playing scions of New York families served alongside coal miners and Native Americans. The notion of a country in which all people could thrive, work together and have great open spaces in which to ride would go on to become defining aspects of Roosevelt's presidency.

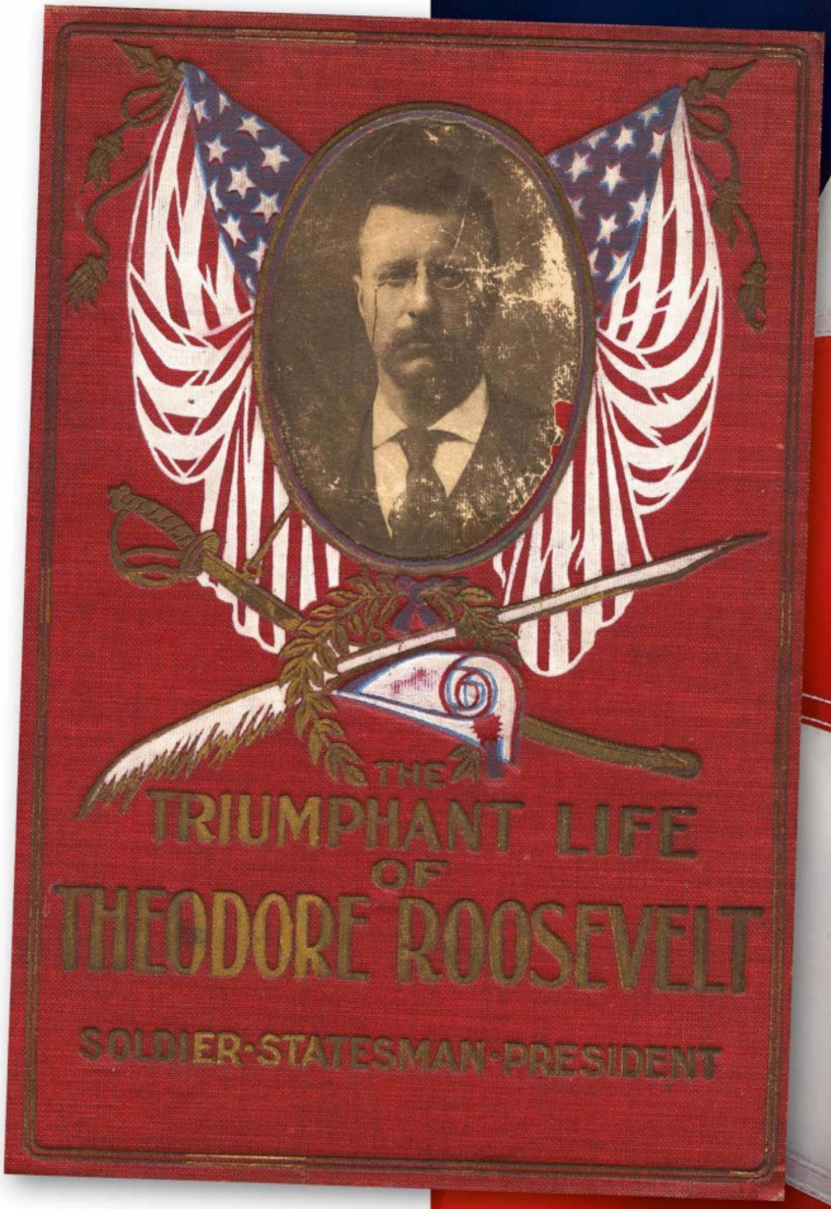
After succeeding to office in 1901, he increasingly promoted the idea of "a square deal for every man, big or small, rich or poor". That meant breaking up some of the big business monopolies that had dominated the gilded age and mediating a coal worker strike to ensure the public's interest was protected (Roosevelt was on the side of the workers).

A square deal also meant protecting consumers. In 1906, Teddy Roosevelt lobbied for congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug and Meat Inspection acts — the meat portion of that perhaps a nod to the fact that Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* [which depicted unsanitary standards in the US meat-packing industry] had been serialised the previous year before being published as a book in February 1906. It was also at Roosevelt's behest that the Forest Service was created. Roosevelt, who is known as 'the Conservation President', was passionate about nature. He used his presidential powers to establish 230 million acres of public land that could not be exploited. His presidency was defined by the notion of creating an America wherein the common man might find prosperity, safety and pleasure.

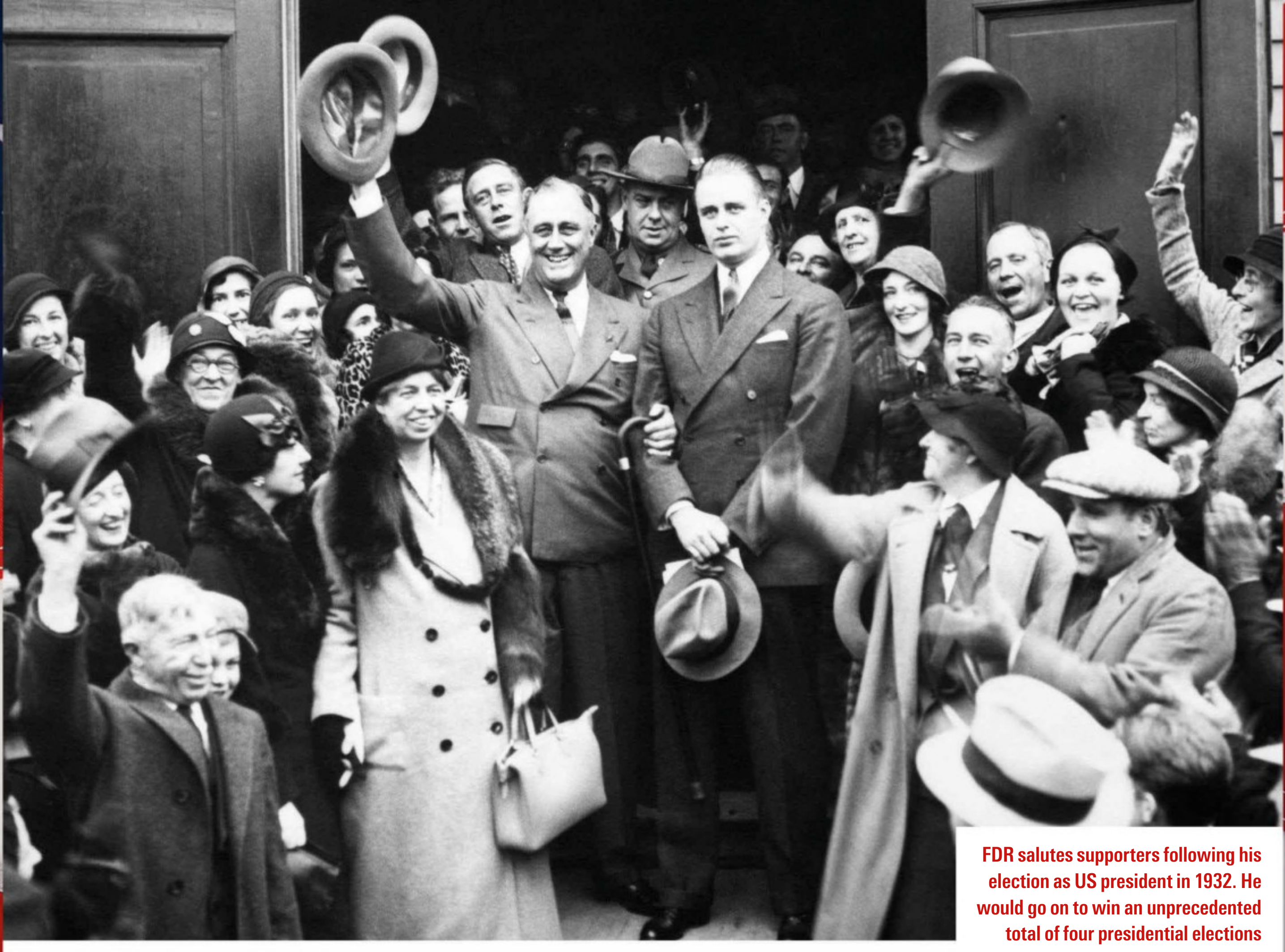
It's not essential that a president's personality matches his accomplishments. Plenty of dull presidents have accomplished some great things. But Teddy Roosevelt was a rare case where the magnetism of the man matched the grandeur of the office.

And look, your kid doesn't go to bed hugging a James K Polk bear.

Jennifer Wright is a popular historian and author of *Madame Restell: The Life, Death, and Resurrection of Old New York's Most Fabulous, Fearless, and Infamous Abortionist* (Hachette, 2023) and the upcoming *Glitz, Glam and Damn Good Time: Mamie Fish and the Gilded Age*



A c1905 book cover saluting Theodore Roosevelt, whose presidency, writes Jennifer Wright, was built around the pillars of prosperity, safety and pleasure



FDR salutes supporters following his election as US president in 1932. He would go on to win an unprecedented total of four presidential elections

Franklin D Roosevelt

🟥 1933–45 🟦 DEMOCRAT

Iwan Morgan applauds a commander-in-chief who overcame personal adversity to lay the foundation for a modern model of leadership

In guiding the US through the Great Depression and Second World War, Franklin D Roosevelt, or FDR as he was known, transformed the presidency, hitherto a relatively small institution, into the modern office that is the fount of national leadership. Having to overcome physical disability after polio left him paralysed from the waist down at age 39 made his achievements all the more remarkable.

Assuming office in 1933 amid the US's worst slump, FDR failed to effect full recovery until war spending renewed prosperity, but otherwise enjoyed unmatched domestic success. His New Deal programme rescued the banking system from meltdown, enabled industrial workers to form unions that bargained for better pay and conditions, and created a new welfare state. It forged a working-class coalition of urban, multi-ethnic voters that helped Roosevelt to win an unprecedented four terms in office (a two-term constitutional limit was ratified in 1951) and transformed the Democrats into the majority party for the next half-century.

Roosevelt's judicial appointments precipitated a constitutional revolution whereby the Supreme Court eventually accepted federal regulation of private enterprise as valid. An outstanding communicator, he uplifted national spirits through his speeches and broadcasts. Finally, he formed a memorable political partnership with First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, whose idealism offset his pragmatism.

As wartime commander-in-chief, FDR set spectacularly high production goals for America's defence industries that ensured the Allies were far better equipped than their Axis enemies. He overruled his generals' plans for a 1943 invasion of France as premature, then prodded a reluctant Winston Churchill into agreeing the D-Day invasion in 1944. The driving force behind the creation of the United Nations Organisation in 1945, he nevertheless regarded great power collaboration as essential for sustainable peace. Accordingly, he accommodated Josef Stalin's demands for Soviet control of eastern Europe to maintain good relations. For critics, this encouraged Stalin's insatiable expansionism, but FDR saw no alternative with the region already under Red Army occupation.

Roosevelt's sudden death while still in office in 1945 meant that history would never know if he could have pre-empted the wartime alliance's rapid disintegration and descent into Cold War.

FDR's record has some significant shortcomings, notably his limited advancement of African-American civil rights and his complicity in the worst federal abuse of citizen rights in history in signing an executive order in 1942 authorising relocation of approximately 120,000 Japanese-Americans in internment camps. Nevertheless, his positive accomplishments were arguably far more significant. They justify his remembrance as America's greatest president.

Iwan Morgan's books include *FDR: Transforming the Presidency and Renewing America* (Bloomsbury, 2022)

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Lyndon Baines Johnson

■ 1963–69 ■ DEMOCRAT

Clifford Williamson salutes an intimidating presence who bulldozed through his vision for ‘a Great Society’

“Power is where power goes,” was the mantra of Lyndon Baines Johnson from his early days as a New Deal bureaucrat and teacher through to his time as president of the US. LBJ, as he was often known, was a commanding and intimidating figure who handed out the ‘Johnson treatment’ in his pursuit of power and change in America. A tall man, he loomed over whoever he was seeking to impress, frighten or cajole into supporting him or his policies.

LBJ was a member of Congress from 1937 until 1961; he graduated from the House to the Senate in 1948 and became a majority leader in 1955. His time in Congress would be key to his effectiveness as a president who used procedure, patronage and his powers of persuasion to break the entrenched opposition of, in particular, the southern Democrats.

He was selected as the running mate to John F Kennedy in 1960, and was raised to the presidency following the assassination of JFK in November 1963. Almost immediately he proved his effectiveness by breaking the Congressional logjam over tax cuts – and, importantly, a Civil Rights Act which was passed in 1964. In May he launched his ‘Great Society’, a wide-ranging legislative programme where he claimed, “no child will go unfed, and no youngster will go unschooled”. There then followed a slew of initiatives that rivalled in scope the New Deal of his hero, Franklin D Roosevelt, and in many cases surpassed it.

Following the violent attacks on the peaceful Selma to Montgomery civil rights march, he would propose the 1965 Voting Rights Act that finally ended the poll taxes, literacy tests and Grandfather clauses that had hindered African-American political participation and enfranchisement.

However, following a series of riots across the US (starting in Watts, Los Angeles in 1965), a growing white backlash would soon be palpable. It was something that not even the formidable political talents of LBJ could stem. The crisis was exacerbated by the deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, where it was becoming increasingly evident that the US had become embroiled in an unwinnable war, despite sending hundreds of thousands of US troops.

Then, in 1968, the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese shocked the US by launching the Tet offensive, a major escalation in the conflict. In the face of spiralling opposition to the war among the American people, Johnson decided not to seek re-election in that year’s presidential election. It was a muted end to what had been a brilliant political career.

Clifford Williamson is a lecturer in modern British and American history at Bath Spa University

NEW LEADERSHIP
KENNEDY JOHNSON

A button for the victorious John F Kennedy-Lyndon B Johnson ticket in the 1960 presidential campaign

Ronald Reagan

■ 1981–89 ■ REPUBLICAN

In 1981, America tasked a former Hollywood actor with prising it from its 70s malaise. He pulled it off with aplomb, writes **Jeremy Black**

Ability and achievement come in many forms. The innovators and the explorers of the possibilities of politics and government win the most praise. But it is also necessary to honour the stabilisers, and Ronald Reagan, the much-mocked elderly ex-actor from California, was one of the greatest.

America and the west were in grave difficulties at the end of the 1970s. Vietnam and Watergate had hollowed out confidence in American power and politics, and the two oil shocks of the 1970s had destabilised the economy and

“He believed in negotiations from strength.” Ronald Reagan welcomes Mikhail Gorbachev to the White House in December 1987 public finances, contributing to a sense of decline. At the end of the decade, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan took this malaise further. What might have come next was a matter of hazard – and, indeed, in 1983, war between the Soviets and the west came very close. Detente had fallen and the Cold War reheated.

Reagan proved an adept responder. Though castigated as a warmonger for his reference to a Soviet 'evil empire', and for the deployment of cruise and Pershing missiles, he believed in negotiations from strength – a stance that eventually bore fruit in the move towards a reduction of tension from 1985. Just as Nixon had reached out to Mao, so Reagan responded to Gorbachev. Earlier crises over Poland and Afghanistan were handled through measures short of war – so, for instance, the US supplied armaments to the Afghan resistance but didn't commit ground troops. The same policy of subversion rather than invasion was employed in Central American countries such as Nicaragua.

The fall of the Soviet system suggested that the pressure of trying to match American military expenditure and economic development was potent, more so than the repeated moves into war and use of troops frequently employed by presidents from 1991 onwards. In light of this, Reagan appears more viable as a model than contemporary criticism often allowed for.

In domestic policy, Reagan pushed growth and deregulation. The American economy provided a clear contrast with the Soviet one, and was thus a more attractive partner for China. In social terms, Reagan was a libertarian, which would have jarred with the intolerance of many members of the modern Republican party.

Charismatic, a great communicator, able to take the pulse of the nation, a good delegator, and a man with a heart… Reagan was an attractive head of state and an accomplished leader.

Jeremy Black is author of books including *The Cold War: A Military History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) and *A Brief History of America* (Robinson, 2024)

Optimism was at the heart of Obama's pitch to a nation reeling from a crippling financial crisis

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Barack Obama

🟥 2009–17 🟦 DEMOCRAT

The first black president was an idealistic reformer who advanced the cause of civil rights at home and turned the spotlight on climate change globally, says **Rebecca Brückmann**

Barack Obama became the nation's first African American president, 390 years after the first documented slave ship arrived in the continental British colonies. Obama's identity should not eclipse his effectiveness: he oversaw the passage of urgent economic reforms and the first comprehensive healthcare law since Lyndon B Johnson signed the 1965 Medicare and Medicaid Act. Obama expanded civil rights, reconfigured US foreign policy, and emphasised the fight against climate change.

Obama's 2008 'Yes We Can' campaign centred his charisma and rhetorical skill. He tapped into widespread dissatisfaction with George W Bush's administration amid the Iraq War and a worldwide economic recession, promoting a hopeful and inclusive vision of the country. Once elected, he confronted the longest economic downturn since the 1930s. One month after Obama took office, in addition to offering financial 'bailouts' for banks and the automotive industry, Congress passed an $800bn stimulus package, investing in infrastructure, education and renewable energy. By the time Obama left office, unemployment had been cut in half.

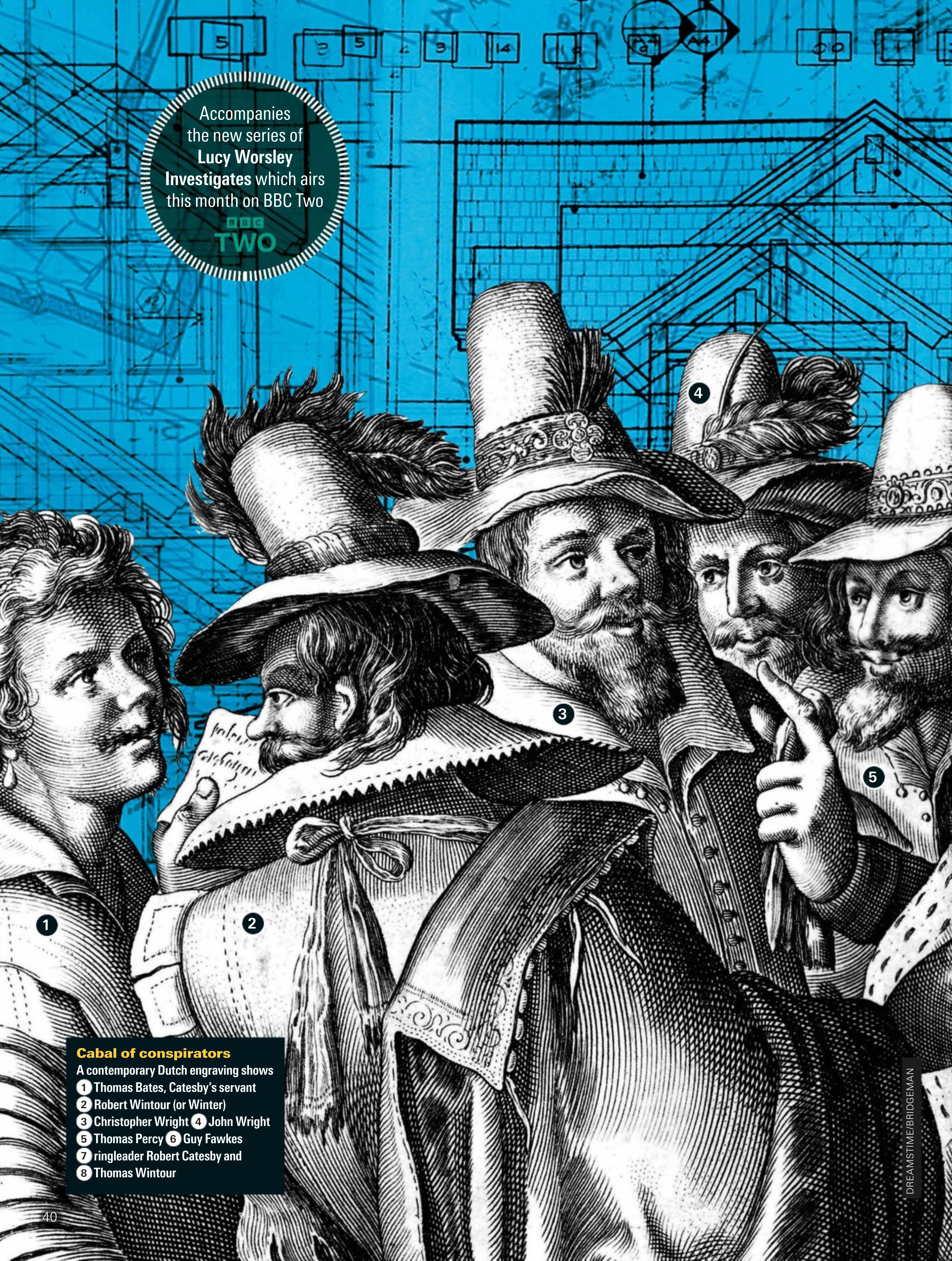
The Affordable Care Act ('Obamacare'), the administration's landmark achievement, outlawed health insurance discrimination based on pre-existing conditions and halved the number of uninsured Americans. The Obama administration strengthened civil rights by bolstering equal pay provisions, repealing the anti-LGBTQ 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell' military policy, supporting marriage equality, and offering a path to work authorisations for undocumented minors.

Confronted by an obstructionist Republican Congress that rebuffed attempts at bipartisan coalition building, the Obama administration increasingly relied on executive orders to effect political change. Obama raised the federal minimum wage, designated national monuments under an Indigenous commission, and cut federal greenhouse gas emissions.

Obama's foreign policy saw the continuation of his predecessors' military interventionism in the Middle East, which made critics question the Nobel Peace Prize he was awarded in 2009. However, he re-established diplomatic relations with Cuba after 54 years, and he brokered a new agreement on nuclear weapons development in Iran. Most constructive of all was his spotlight on the climate crisis, which enabled the breakthrough 2016 Paris Agreement.

In the face of racist threats, birtherist conspiracies and a conservative countermovement, Barack Obama was a remarkably effective president during socio-politically challenging times in the 21st century.

Rebecca Brückmann is the author of *Massive Resistance and Southern Womanhood* (University of Georgia Press, 2021)



Accompanies the new series of **Lucy Worsley Investigates** which airs this month on BBC Two

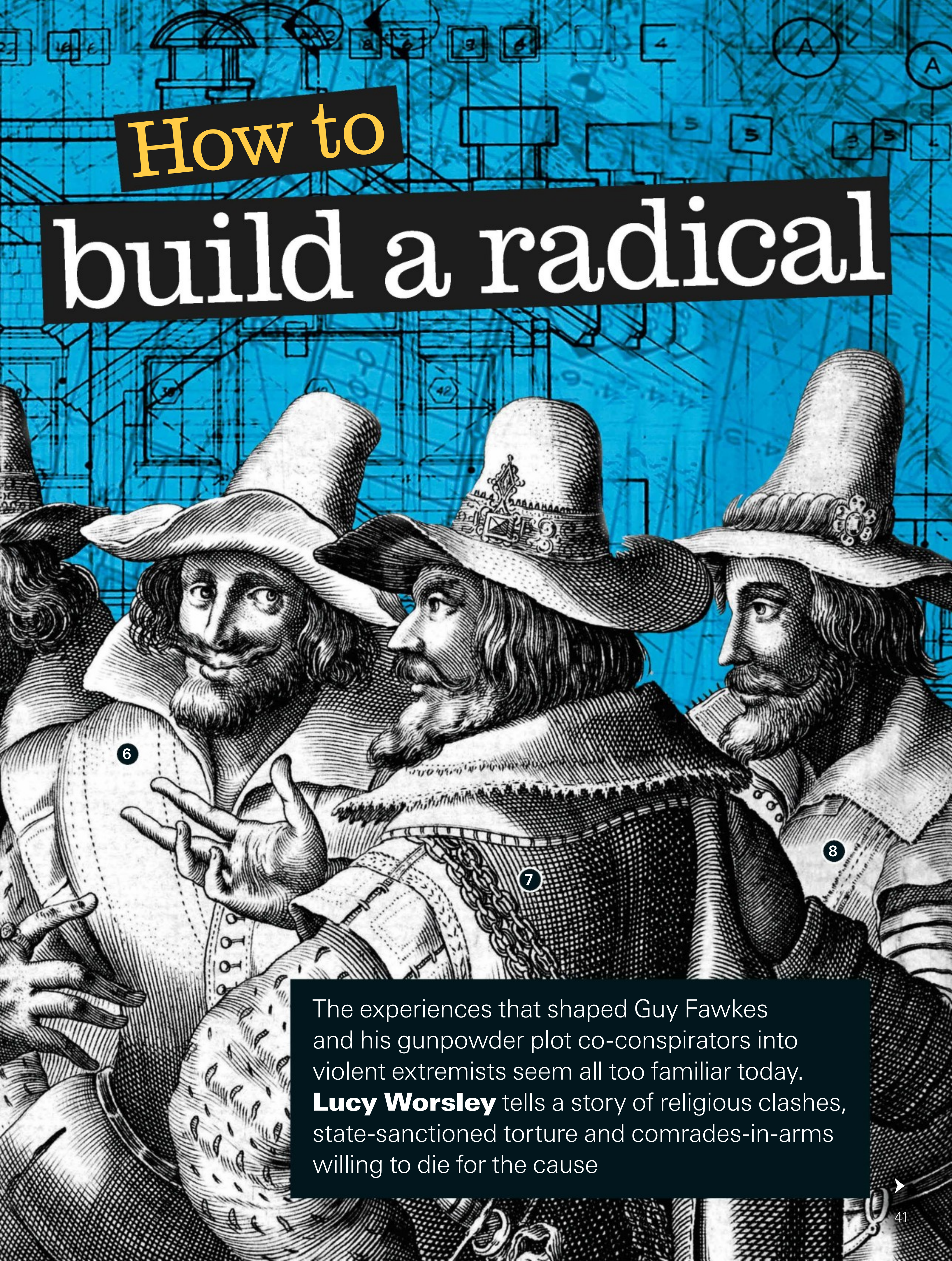
BBC TWO

Cabal of conspirators

A contemporary Dutch engraving shows ① Thomas Bates, Catesby's servant ② Robert Wintour (or Winter) ③ Christopher Wright ④ John Wright ⑤ Thomas Percy ⑥ Guy Fawkes ⑦ ringleader Robert Catesby and ⑧ Thomas Wintour

DREAMSTIME/BRIDGEMAN

How to build a radical



The experiences that shaped Guy Fawkes and his gunpowder plot co-conspirators into violent extremists seem all too familiar today. **Lucy Worsley** tells a story of religious clashes, state-sanctioned torture and comrades-in-arms willing to die for the cause

Towards the end of 1605, a man was being interrogated in a smallish building deep within the fortress of the Tower of London. It was here, in the most secure place in Britain, that the state dealt with its enemies. This particular enemy of the state was named Guy Fawkes.

The records of that interrogation are today among the treasures of the National Archives, and going there to film them for the new series of *Lucy Worsley Investigates* was an unbelievable thrill. It's evident that a secretary recorded Fawkes's words, and that the conspirator was asked to sign his name to verify that the record was accurate. On one page, his signature is clear and confident: Guido Fawkes. Two days later, though, his name is no more than the faintest of scrawls.

Historians generally agree that this difference is because, in the time between scribbling the two signatures, he'd been tortured and had lost the use of his hands. A few weeks later, he would also lose his life.

Tale of violence

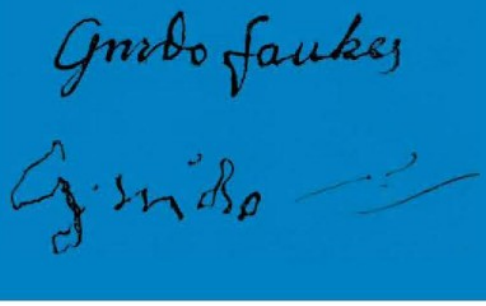
It's quite extraordinary to think that, 400 years later, this tale of violence has morphed into an annual occasion for family-friendly fun. The reason for lighting bonfires and fireworks on the fifth of November is now largely forgotten. Technically, we're celebrating the foiling of a plot against King James VI & I, planned by Catholic extremists whom many would call terrorists.

If you step off a London Underground train at Charing Cross – perhaps on your way to visit the National Gallery – you can admire an enormous tiled image of the gunpowder plotters that takes up the whole height of the platform wall. Seen by thousands of commuters, tourists and schoolkids on a London day out, the image of the conspirators – with their tall hats, flowing locks and furtive body language – makes them look like a rather stylish rock band.

But with violence and religious extremism wreaking havoc round the globe today, it seems timely to revisit what might be mistaken for a cosy old story of plots and plotters. Because when we compare our knowledge of radicalisation in the modern world with what happened to Fawkes and his fellow conspirators, many similarities become clear.

Perhaps because the name of Guy Fawkes is so well known today, many people don't realise that he wasn't the most significant of the conspirators. The plot's mastermind was actually a Warwickshire gentleman called Robert Catesby, whose role has been rather overshadowed by the dramatic circumstances of Fawkes's capture and subsequent torture.

Built to burn
Children and a smiling nurse carry an effigy of Guy Fawkes to be set ablaze on 5 November 1947. Though Bonfire Night is celebrated across the UK, few really 'remember, remember' details of the foiled plot



Guido fawkes

Guido

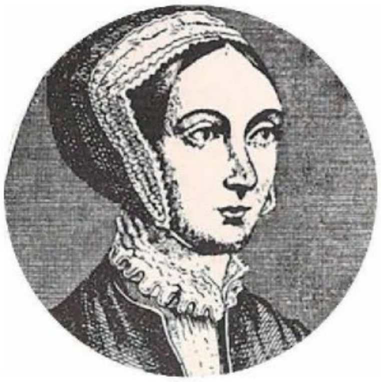
Testament to torture
Guy Fawkes's signatures on a record of his interrogation in 1605, the second of them revealing the impact of torture that left him unable to write clearly

What the Charing Cross tube picture does do accurately is give the sense that the group felt a strong social connection – like a band of brothers, which some of them were, literally: among the conspirators were two sets of siblings, including Christopher and John Wright.

They were among Fawkes's fellow plotters who had known each other during their childhoods in the city of York. There, the Catholic faith was alive and well – and subject to intense persecution – in the later years of the reign of the Protestant queen Elizabeth I.

Guy was himself baptised a Protestant in 1570 but in his teens, it seems, he embraced Catholicism with all the fervour of a convert. His journey towards radicalisation could have begun as early as 1586, when he may have witnessed the appalling public execution of a York woman, Margaret Clitherow. Having been caught sheltering priests of the outlawed Catholic faith, she was crushed to death with heavy weights.

In the eyes of her fellow Catholics, her death turned Margaret into a martyr. A brown and shrivelled hand, purportedly one



Inspiring martyr
A woodcut shows Margaret Clitherow, who was brutally killed in 1586 having been caught sheltering Catholic priests. Did witnessing this event start Fawkes's radicalisation?

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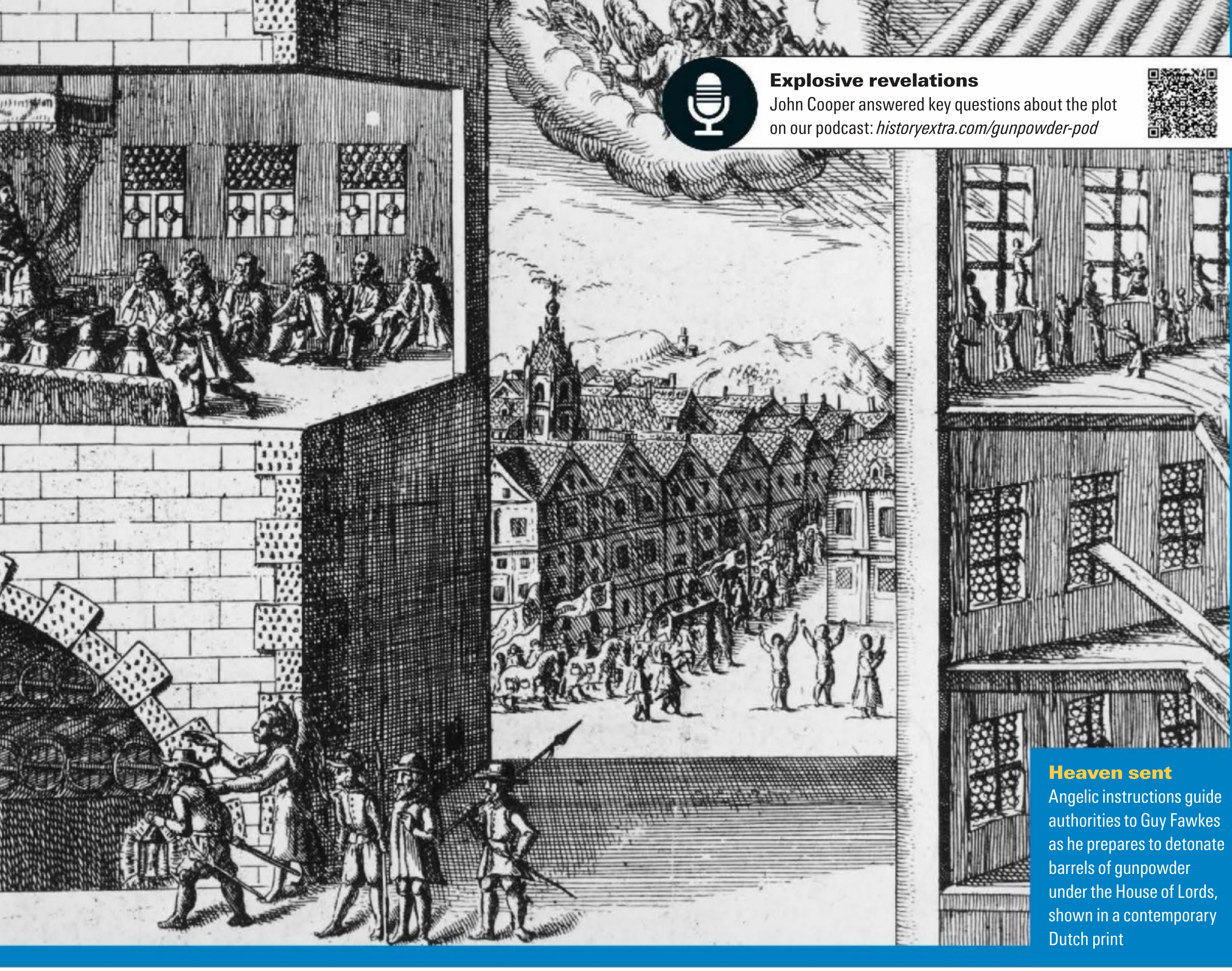

Explosive revelations
John Cooper answered key questions about the plot on our podcast: *historyextra.com/gunpowder-pod*

Heaven sent
Angelic instructions guide authorities to Guy Fawkes as he prepares to detonate barrels of gunpowder under the House of Lords, shown in a contemporary Dutch print

of Margaret's, is venerated today in the Bar Convent in York as a holy relic.

It seems likely, then, that Fawkes and the Wrights would have realised early on that life would not be easy for them unless they gave up on Catholicism – or on the government.

Nurturing extremism

In his early twenties, Fawkes made a big life change. He sold his possessions near York and travelled to mainland Europe to fight as a paid soldier for the Catholic cause.

Many modern-day extremists make similar life choices. Learning the trade of warfare abroad, surrounded by young men with the same beliefs and removed from the calming influence of family and community at home, the world view of a soldier fighting in the name of faith often narrows to black and white.

Jason Burke, *The Guardian*'s international security correspondent, knows all about this process. An extremist fighter, he explains, is 'best' trained over several weeks in a special camp. It's vital to prevent the wannabe soldier from going home each evening to see mum.

Fawkes sold his possessions in York and travelled to mainland Europe to fight as a paid soldier for the Catholic cause

In Europe, Fawkes was soon on the payroll of Catholic Spain, learning skills that would, in time, make him attractive to the plotters. In particularly, he became familiar with gunpowder and explosions.

Meanwhile, another young man was also being radicalised – Robert Catesby, whose idea it later was to blow up the House of Lords in order to kill the king, some of his family, his members of parliament and the whole seat of power. Catesby had long been dissatisfied with the way England was governed. Under Elizabeth, his family had paid the fines exacted for refusing to attend Protestant church services. More dangerously, he got himself caught up in the Essex Rebellion of 1601. This wasn't specifically a Catholic plot but, rather, involved a grouping of disaffected people of various stripes who aimed to change the power constellations at court. That uprising was unsuccessful, and Catesby was forced to pay a huge fine for his part in it.

Then, in 1603, Elizabeth died and James VI of Scotland inherited her crown. It seems that Catesby had high hopes of the new regime. The new king knew that his succession as James I of England might well be challenged – so, being a clever politician, he tried to appeal to a wide base of potential supporters in England, hinting strongly that he'd be more sympathetic than Elizabeth to those of his future subjects who were Catholics. After all, he had a Catholic wife, Anne of Denmark.

When James came to the English throne, though, those who knew him best perhaps weren't surprised to find that the hinted-at new policy of tolerance never materialised – quite the opposite, in fact. Catesby and

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other disappointed Catholics were chagrined to find the new king proclaiming in parliament that he was never going to tolerate their religion. Another staging post on the journey towards direct action was passed.

Mutual friends

Catesby did not know Guy Fawkes at this stage, but they had one key thing in common: Fawkes's new friends, the Spanish. Spanish archives contain correspondence from Fawkes, reporting from the European mainland on what he understood about the situation in England. The new King James's regime was not stable, Fawkes claimed, arguing that it was justifiable to use violence to promote the 'right' kind of religion. Fawkes was clearly ripe for recruitment as a Catholic conspirator.

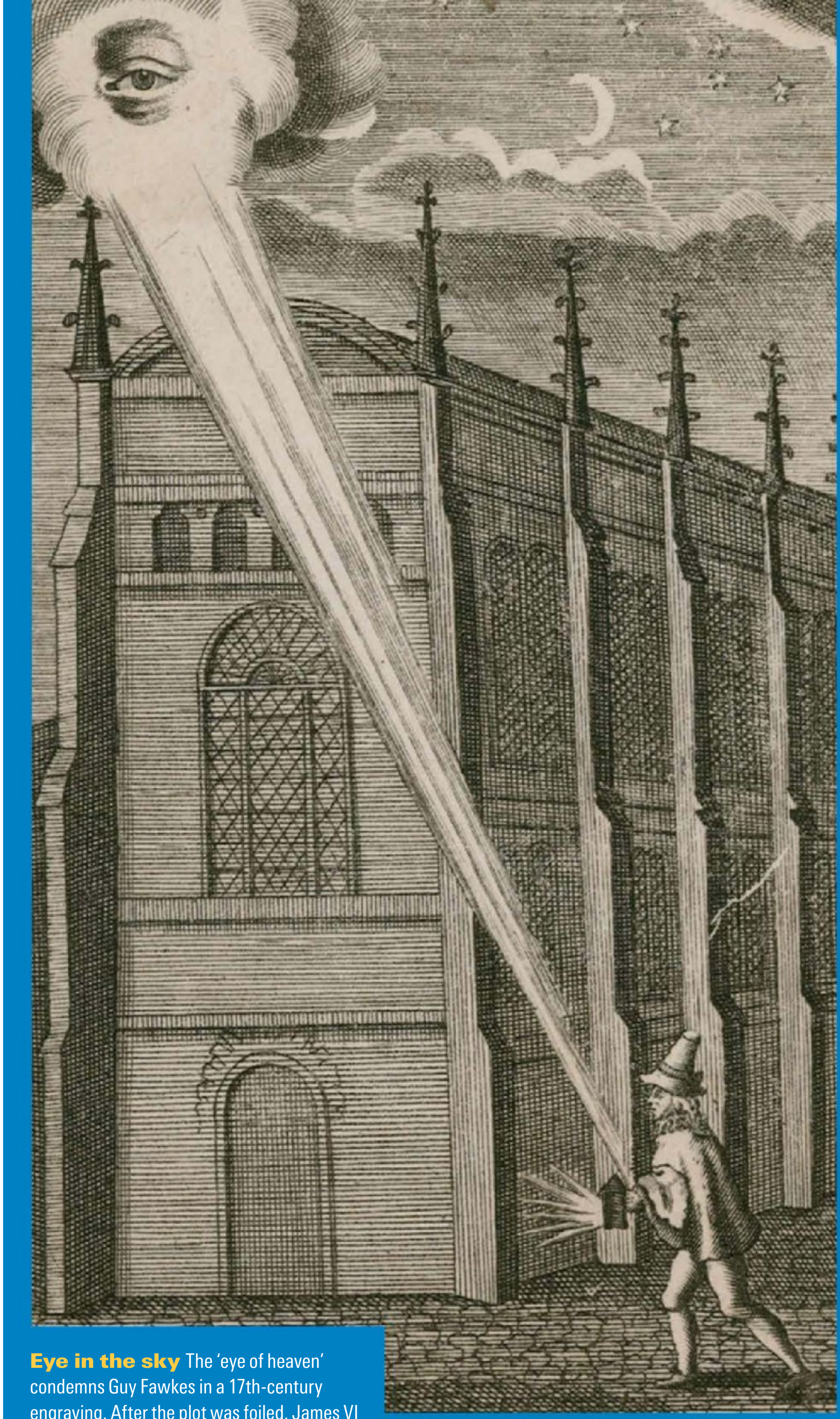
And so we come to vital documents for the history of the gunpowder plot: the records of the confessions made by the surviving conspirators after it was all over. I looked at one set, held at Hatfield House Archives, which take us right into the room during some of the plotters' meetings, allowing us to overhear those dangerous conversations.

One of the conspirators, Thomas Wintour (sometimes spelled Winter), described the moment when Catesby told him that he'd thought of a way of restoring Catholicism to England. His idea was to blow up parliament on the day of its opening session, killing the king and all of the MPs who had passed unjust laws against Catholics. Chillingly, Catesby believed that those actions were reason enough for them to die.

Catesby had a task for Wintour. He was to travel to Europe to find some "confident" gentleman – meaning one in whom they could have confidence – to act as the plot's technician. He'd heard that a certain Guy Fawkes might be a suitable candidate – and one who also offered another important advantage. Having lived abroad for so many years, few people in England would remember Fawkes's face. Catesby was already on the authorities' radar, but Fawkes might walk down the street in Westminster without being recognised. To further obscure his identity, Fawkes also did something common in modern-day extremism: he adopted a war-name. He would now go by the moniker John Johnson.

The plot was taking shape. After the planned explosion in Westminster, Catesby intended to take advantage of the chaos. With James's regime in disarray, a great uprising would be launched in Catesby's native Midlands, and Catesby would snatch James's daughter, Elizabeth, to place her on the throne as a puppet queen.

But time ticked on. There was a delay

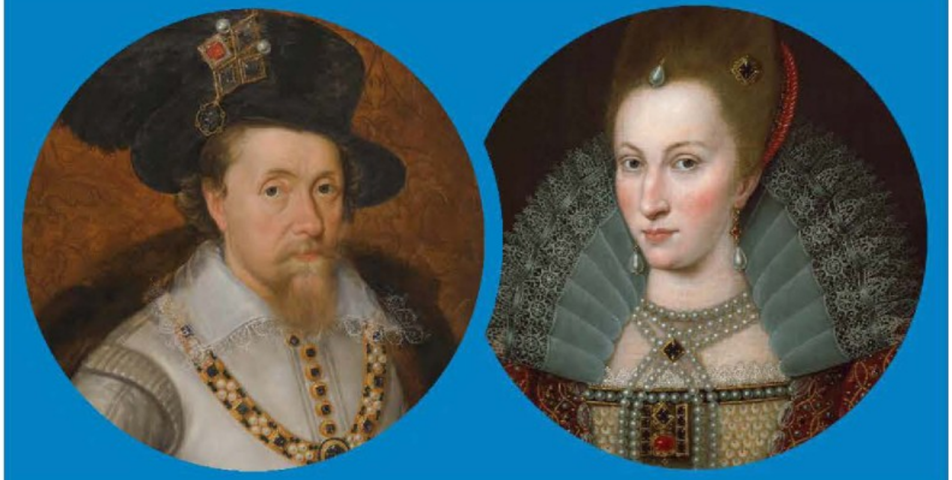


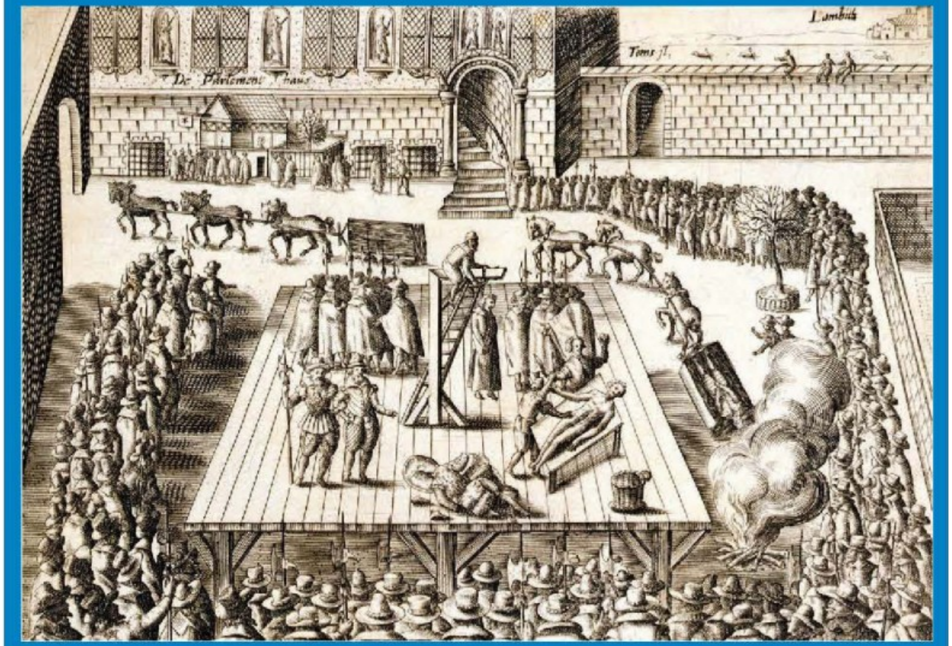
Eye in the sky The 'eye of heaven' condemns Guy Fawkes in a 17th-century engraving. After the plot was foiled, James VI & I was seen as having been saved by God

Night light A lantern reputedly carried by Fawkes on 4/5 November 1605, now in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford

BRIDGEMAN

Fawkes was found hiding in a cellar with his dark lantern, his barrels of gunpowder and the fuse to ignite a planned explosion


Changing faces An early 17th-century painting of James VI & I, and a contemporary portrait of his Catholic wife, Anne of Denmark. The era of tolerance Catholics hoped he'd bring to England didn't materialise



Final moments Guy Fawkes and three co-conspirators are hanged, drawn and quartered on 31 January 1606, shown in an engraving made that year. Four others had been executed the previous day

when the opening of parliament was postponed, and soon there were just too many people in on the secret. Then there was a leak. One plotter, anxious that Catholics present in parliament on the key day would also lose their lives, wrote an anonymous warning: the Catholic Lord Monteagle received a letter telling him not to attend.

This missive made its way into the hands of the authorities, where it caused much concern. Was the threat real? Many questions remain about how much the authorities already knew at that point, but certainly an extra patrol was laid on in Westminster. As every schoolkid now knows, Fawkes was found hiding in a cellar with his dark lantern, his barrels of gunpowder and the fuse to ignite an explosion that would very likely have transformed Britain's religion.

Interrogation techniques

Captured and taken to the Tower, Fawkes next experienced something else still common worldwide: interrogation. I asked psychologist Laura Farrugia, assistant professor at Northumberland University, who helps to train police in carrying out ethical and effective interviews, to assess the techniques used on Fawkes. She noted that the initial questions posed by authorities at the Tower, who were accustomed to interrogating suspects, were concise, targeted, comprehensible.

Whenever Fawkes knew or guessed that the authorities already knew the answers, he gave them freely. However, Fawkes didn't name his fellow conspirators. So the king himself stepped in, drawing up a list of less-successful, more 'clever', complicated questions that would have been difficult and confusing for any suspect to answer.

Unsurprisingly, this approach failed. Nevertheless, Fawkes did say something that provides perhaps the first and the last piece in the jigsaw of his radicalisation: he would not betray his friends.

Extremists were, and are, social creatures. They rely on friendship and camaraderie. This, as well as their political and religious beliefs, keeps them going.

The king ordered torture, and Fawkes did eventually crack. Ironically, though, the authorities didn't need his information. They had followed other leads, tracking Catholics who had left London suddenly just before the attack, and eventually caught up with the key plotters in a safe house in the Midlands.

Thomas Wintour's confession recounts a scene, just before the authorities stormed in, that would have been romantic – if it were not acted out by men who'd been willing to take hundreds, if not thousands, of lives. They agreed to die together. And when the local sheriff entered, guns blazing, Catesby did just that, taking a bullet that killed him. Fawkes and a few other surviving conspirators were hanged, drawn and quartered in London.

The plotters would perhaps have been mortified to know that their plot not only failed in its aims but even helped to secure James's regime. It turned him into a survivor – someone with God on his side. He insisted that his personal achievement in defeating this plot be commemorated on its anniversary every year. Four centuries later, many Britons are still obeying him – even though most have forgotten exactly why. H

Lucy Worsley is an ambassador for the charity Historic Royal Palaces

Season 2 of **Lucy Worsley Investigates** airs this month on BBC Two and will be available on BBC iPlayer in January

A HILL TO DIE ON

In early 1944, the Allied advance in Italy was brought to a halt at a rocky outcrop called Monte Cassino. And at the heart of the bloodbath that followed, writes **James Holland**, was flawed leadership

TOPFOTO

AGAINST THE WALL New Zealand troops search for snipers in a demolished house in Cassino in 1944. Securing the massif above that town was vital for Allied forces in order for them to reach and capture Rome during the liberation of Italy

➤

FIGHTING CHANCE Troops of the Polish II Corps in action during the battle for Monte Cassino. Allied forces involved in this bloody clash also included Indian, Canadian, British, French, Italian, South African and American troops

For the men of the US 34th 'Red Bulls' Infantry Division, just getting up onto the Monte Cassino massif was an achievement. To reach this rocky outcrop, in late January 1944 those troops had crossed a two-mile-wide flooded valley, an area laced with enemy mines and overlooked by German troops in the mountains above.

The weather was cold, wet and miserable, and the Americans' route had taken them across a badly smashed causeway that offered an easy target for enemy artillery. Those troops had then traversed the bed of the Rapido river, which was impossible for tanks to cross, and clambered up into the hills and gulleys that comprise the lower reaches of the towering massif. Finally, they had slipped and scrambled their way up onto two of the ridges that cross Monte Cassino.

By 6 February, the Second Battalion of the 135th Infantry, one of the three regiments of the Red Bulls, was within a stone's throw of Point 593, the rocky outcrop at the end of one of these long ridges dubbed 'Snakeshead Ridge' by the Americans. The Germans launched a frenzied assault to displace them, only for the Red Bulls to counter-attack. Bayonets fixed, shooting from the hip, they moved from rock to rock, picking their way through the increasingly loose and stony terrain along the narrow ridge. Bullets were zipping and pinging all around, mortars and grenades were exploding, and shrapnel and lethal shards of razor-sharp rock were fizzing through the air.

"There was a lot of screaming and cursing," recalled 23-year-old Sergeant Ralph Schaps from Minnesota. "We were not going to let the goddam krauts push us off the hill." So close was the fighting that a rifle butt smashed into Schaps' jaw but, somehow, he survived. The Red Bulls prevailed, though Point 593 itself remained tantalisingly in enemy hands. Schaps found an abandoned bottle of brandy, which he swilled around his mouth. After spitting out some blood and fragments of teeth, he took a couple more swigs and started to feel better.

The Americans were now looking down over the far side of the Monte Cassino massif, directly onto the Liri Valley and, more importantly, onto Highway 6, the ancient Via Casilina – the main road north. If they could reach it, the entire German Gustav Line – the system of defences constructed across Italy from the mouth of the Garigliano river on the Tyrrhenian Sea to the mouth of the Sangro on the Adriatic, south-east of Pescara – would be unlocked and the route to Rome, around 75 miles to the north-west as the crow flies, laid wide open.

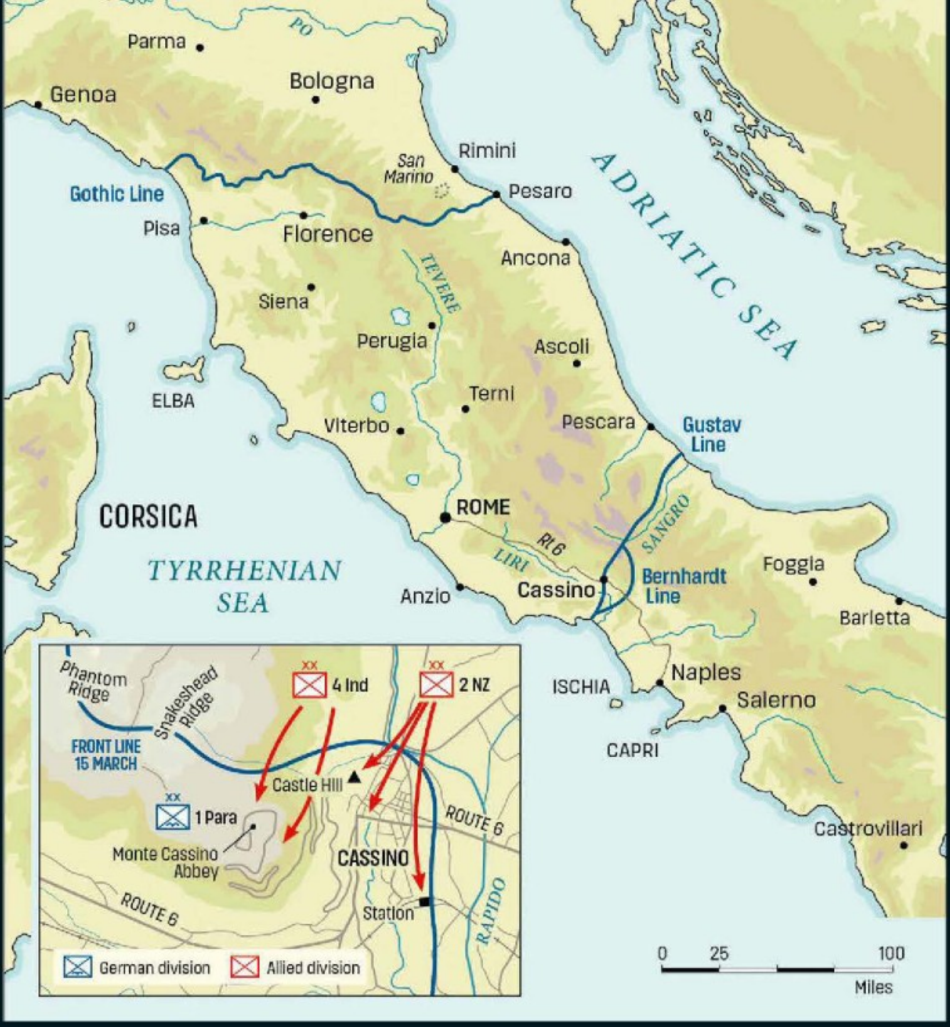
Costly campaign

All of which raises the question: if things were going so well at this point, why did the battle result in such a waste of lives, with the Allies suffering at least 55,000 casualties? It can be partly explained by difficult terrain and awful weather conditions; heavy rain fell almost continuously through much of the previous winter. Yet, though this was clearly a terrible place and time to fight, there were sound reasons to do so – and, were it not for lamentable failures of leadership, casualties might have been far fewer.

The Allied invasion of mainland Italy in September 1943 had had four key aims: to ensure that Italy was

ALAMY

AXIS OF EGO
Field Marshal Albert Kesselring (centre), commander of German forces in Italy, in March 1944. His decision to stubbornly hold Monte Cassino, following Hitler's refusal to cede ground, led to the battle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Cassino
Bernhardt Line
Foggia
Barletta
ISCHIA
Naples
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Phantom Ridge
Snakeshead Ridge
4 Ind
2 NZ
FRONT LINE 15 MARCH
Castle Hill
1 Para
Route 6
Monte Cassino Abbey
CASSINO
Route 6
Station
Rapido
German division
Allied division

PENINSULA WAR
Our map shows German defensive lines in Italy, 1944, and, inset, the Allied campaign to seize Monte Cassino

MAP BY PAUL HEWITT / BATTLEFIELD-DESIGN.CO.UK

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knocked out of the war for good; to draw German troops away from the eastern front and soon-to-be-opened western fronts; to capture Rome; and, perhaps most importantly, to take control of the airfield complex around Foggia, in Puglia near the spur on Italy's heel, from where heavy bombers could further tighten the noose around Nazi Germany by bombing the southern Reich.

Three of these four aims had been achieved swiftly after the initial landings at Salerno, south-east of Naples, on 9 September. However, by early 1944 Rome still eluded the Allies. In addition, having captured Foggia in September 1943, they needed to ensure that it wasn't retaken by the Germans, who had more divisions in Italy than the Allies did. Establishing a buffer of at least 50 miles north of Rome was, therefore, a priority. That's why, in early 1944, the Allies were desperately trying to break through mountain defences to clear a route to the capital.

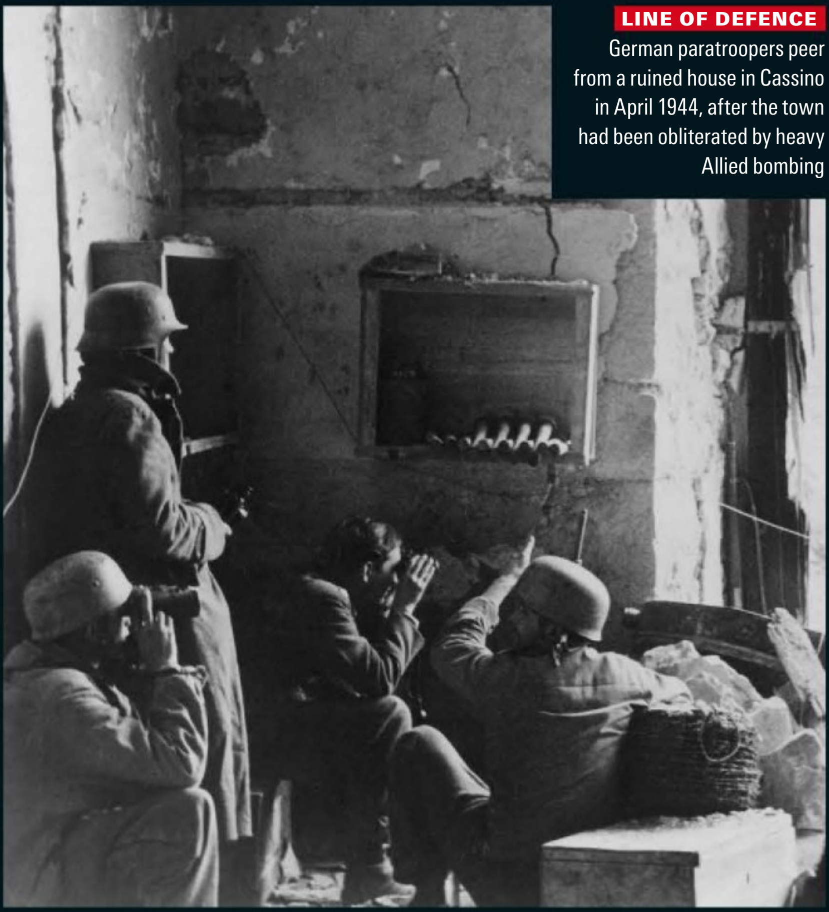
By the time the Red Bulls approached Point 593, the German forces had already suffered a battering at the hands of a polyglot international force led by General Mark Clark, commander of the US Fifth Army. The ferocity of the onslaught had so depleted the troops of the German 44th Hoch und Deutschmeister Division, which was defending the Monte Cassino massif, that its numbers were down to about 800 men from a full-strength complement of 15,000. That high level of casualties explains why, all things considered and despite the privations their troops had endured, the Americans had enjoyed a comparatively easy time getting up onto the massif.

Spitting out blood and fragments of teeth, the US sergeant took a couple more swigs of brandy

Though they'd mounted a highly effective defence up to that point, almost every senior German commander in Italy now believed that the time had come to pull back. In the north of the country, mountains stretched almost continuously across the peninsula between Pisa and Rimini, forming a natural barrier. Defences were already being built along this new front, where supply lines were shorter and positions easier to maintain. With German forces in retreat on the eastern front, and with an Allied assault imminent west of the Reich, it made sense to cut losses and withdraw to this defensive line far north of Rome.

The führer's folly

Hitler, though, refused to cede ground – and his supremo in Italy, Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, was determined to do the führer's bidding. The result was an appalling misuse of infantry divisions: units were pulled apart, sent hither and thither, filling holes and gaps, and being butchered as a result. The replacements that arrived were largely older men and teenagers with little training. So worried was General der Panzertruppe Fridolin von Senger und Etterlin, the German XIV Corps commander, that he decided to risk the wrath of Kesselring and Hitler, and made one more personal appeal to withdraw. "This proposal," von Senger noted tersely in his diary, "was not approved." By doggedly defending the Gustav Line, Kesselring was committing his troops to ever more sacrifice – and for no tangible long-term benefit.



LINE OF DEFENCE
German paratroopers peer from a ruined house in Cassino in April 1944, after the town had been obliterated by heavy Allied bombing

WRECKED TOWN
German paratroopers traverse Cassino after the Allied bombardment. A failure to rapidly follow up the bombing led to a tough attritional battle

Whatever the shortcomings of the overall German approach, the situation at Monte Cassino was being bolstered. Reinforcements were hurriedly sent forward, including the 90 Panzergrenadier Division and First Fallschirmjäger (Airborne) Division. Sent to take command was General Ernst-Günther Baade, a highly intelligent, experienced and skilful leader.

Baade immediately organised the defence of Monte Cassino far more effectively. He created two linked rings of defence, rather like a figure of eight, with Point 593 where the two circles met. This meant that, should it be overrun, heavy fire could be directed on the attackers from each side, allowing the defenders to quickly retake it. Manning machine guns and mortars effectively required some skill and training, but the key was to avoid giving up ground and to keep firing. The newly arrived Fallschirmjäger, though hideously understrength, were ideally placed to do this, with enough experienced warriors to ensure that the under-trained teenage replacements could provide stout defence.

Among those now defending Point 593 were Major Rudolf Kratzert and his Third Battalion of the Third Fallschirmjäger Regiment, which reached Monte Cassino with just 236 troops rather than the 1,000 he should have been commanding. (It was one of his men who walloped Ralph Schaps.) Time and again, the Red Bulls tried to take Point 593 and the parallel Phantom Ridge and Colle d'Angelo. Every time, they were pushed back.

Down in the valley, US commanders reckoned that one more push would do it – but they had no idea of Baade's defensive system, and could not see how these narrow ridgelines were canalising the attackers. Rather than attacking on a broad front and overwhelming the enemy, the Americans were forced to inch forward companies of 100 or fewer men across bare rock, while being mown down by mortars, grenades and machine guns.

The Red Bulls were rapidly running out of steam. So General Sir Harold Alexander, the Allied Army Group Commander, created the New Zealand Corps comprising men from the New Zealand Second Division, Fourth Indian Division and British 78th Division. Leading that new force was New Zealand Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg VC, the most senior divisional commander, who had already briefly led a corps in Tunisia. He'd won his Victoria Cross on the western front during the First World War, but he was no great intellect – and, compounding this deficiency, he'd been given no corps staff.

Political sensitivities

As General Clark quickly discovered, Freyberg had been horribly over-promoted. Yet the Fifth Army commander's hands were tied because of political sensitivities. The New Zealanders represented a British dominion, and were punching significantly above their weight in the war. There were also morale problems. Some 6,000 Kiwi veterans of the North Africa campaign had been sent home on furlough – only to discover that large numbers of their compatriots had avoided the draft. Most of these experience soldiers refused to return for a second stint until those exempted had done their first. News of this mutiny spread to New Zealanders in Italy, and Clark had been warned to tread carefully.

TOPFOTO/ALAMY

FLAWED FIGUREHEAD
Lieutenant-General Sir Bernard Freyberg, pictured during the battle for Monte Cassino in 1944. The NZ commander in Italy lacked strategic nous, blunting the Allied assault on this important German-held position

IWM NA10630

Freyberg's shortcoming shouldn't have been an issue, because commanding the Fourth Indian Division was the extremely able Major-General Francis Tuker, a soldier who could provide the strategic thinking that Freyberg lacked. Having arrived at the front ahead of Freyberg, Tuker soon realised that the only rational option was to abandon the Monte Cassino massif and to instead attack farther north. There the ground was higher but wider and less scored with gulleys, fissures and narrow ridges. It was also significantly less well defended. Tuker additionally suggested mounting a crossing of the Rapido where the Texans had earlier attempted, but this time with properly planned fire support (which the Texans had, inexplicably, not used).

Freyberg readily supported these suggestions – then disaster struck: Tuker was hit by a crippling bout of rheumatoid arthritis, and had to be taken to hospital. Left without Tuker's strategic vision, the easily swayed Freyberg was influenced by the views of the US II Corps commander General Geoffrey Keyes and General Charles 'Doc' Ryder, commanding the Red Bulls, who both questioned Tuker's plans. Neither had been on the mountain, and were unaware of the situation on the ground. Freyberg was persuaded to continue the assault on the Monte Cassino massif.

When Tuker learned of this change of tack, he forced himself from his hospital bed to plead with Freyberg – but found the New Zealander deaf to his arguments. Tuker pointed out the problems of troops attacking along narrow ridges, and suggested that the only way to break the German defences was with an overwhelming bombardment of the entire massif using high-capacity 2,000lb and 4,000lb 'bunker buster' bombs. Among other things, this would be necessary to destroy the tall, thick stone walls of the ancient Benedictine abbey perched at the end of the massif, which the Allies believed housed a German observation post. "The 1,000lb bomb," Tuker told Freyberg in a follow-up note, "would be next to useless to effect this." Heavy four-engine bombers were needed, not fighter-bombers, and the bombing should be carefully co-ordinated with an immediate infantry attack to follow. "The essence of the bombardment," Tuker added, "should be its obliterating weight, suddenness and duration and the immediate continuance of the bombing by artillery bombardment and infantry attack early in the night under the artillery bombardment."

American troops inched forward across bare rock, mown down by mortars, grenades and machine guns

Fatal misunderstanding

Tuker's intention had been to shock Freyberg into readopting his original plan. Instead, the New Zealander headed to Clark's command post, where he demanded an air assault using single-prop 'Kittybombers' and 1,000-pounders to destroy the abbey. How Freyberg could have so badly misunderstood Tuker's suggestions is hard to fathom: the latter had followed up his personal visit, conducted in acute pain, with written instructions so that there was no chance of mistaking his very specific plans.

Clark was, understandably, opposed to destroying the abbey for what seemed to him to be no good reason. The way Freyberg presented it, there was no co-ordinated plan

RELIGIOUS RUIN The Benedictine abbey on Monte Cassino, established in the sixth century and destroyed by Allied bombing. Unreliable intelligence had suggested that the monastery was a key German observation post

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involving the infantry or the destruction of other German positions on the massif. Moreover, the historic site was originally founded in the sixth century, and the Allies aimed to portray themselves as liberators, not cultural vandals. Clark appealed to Alexander, who backed Freyberg. Had Freyberg been American, it's clear, Clark would have kicked this plan into the long grass.

The bombing itself was a catastrophe. The Fourth Indian Division was delayed in getting onto the mountain, because so many of the surviving Red Bulls had to be carried back down, and because different ammunition had to be brought up. In addition, in Tuker's absence his command had passed to Brigadier Dimoline, the division's artillery commander, who had neither the experience nor the strength of character to impose himself.

Having finally ascended onto the massif, the Fifth Indian Brigade discovered that – despite being told otherwise – Point 593 was still in German hands, and hatched plans to capture it first in a preliminary assault on the night of 15 February. That morning, however, without any warning from Freyberg or anyone else, they learned that the bombers would arrive to unleash their loads at any moment. There was to be no co-ordination between air and ground forces. The strategic air forces had a weather window and a gap in action elsewhere, so flew over quickly, dropping a handful of 1,000-pounders but mostly 500-pounders – far less powerful than the bombs that Tuker had insisted would be necessary.

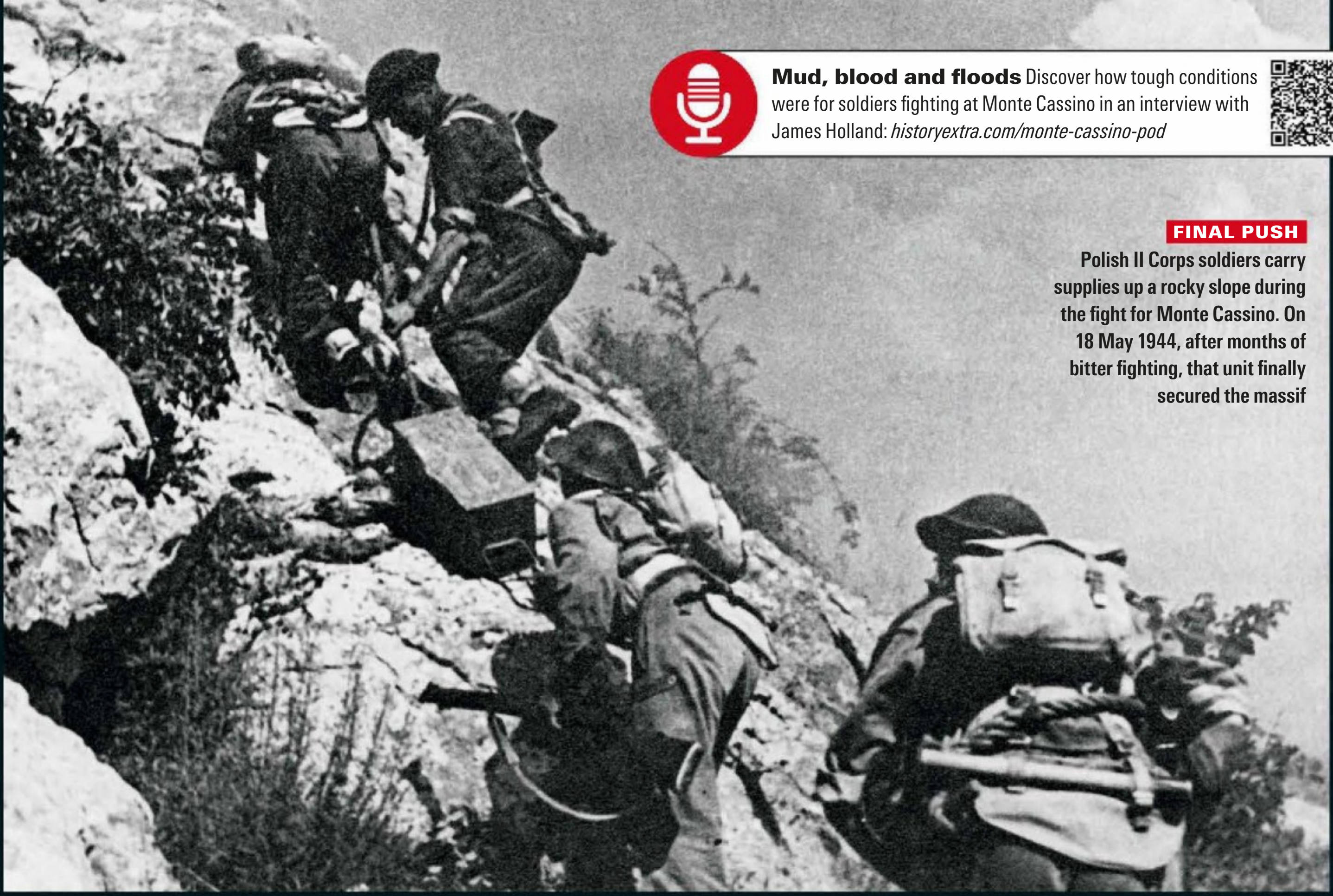
True, the abbey was destroyed, leaving a shattered wreck of tumbling debris and killing hundreds of civilians sheltering there – though not, it seems, a single German. But when the First Royal Sussex tried to take Point 593 that night, they failed. So did a subsequent attack the following night and, with it, the chance of swiftly clearing Monte Cassino. The Germans held firm in their figure-of-eight positions, with the Fourth Indian Division, supported by the Texans on their right flank, holding the Allied half of the massif.

The abbey was destroyed, leaving a shattered wreck and killing hundreds of civilians

Savage winter

A subsequent German counter-attack in Italy – Operation Fischfang, launched on 16 February at Anzio on the coast between Cassino and Rome – was thwarted by the Allies. This only served to re-emphasise the challenges of launching a successful offensive in this inhospitable terrain during a savage winter. Alexander thus decided to wait for better weather before the next push, and to bring both the Eighth Army – mainly on the Adriatic flank of Italy – and Fifth Army side by side, to hammer German supply lines with air power and then to strike along a broad front once he had built up overwhelming strength.

Alexander was, though, persuaded to make one more attempt on Monte Cassino and at capturing the town below. Rain fell solidly for more than three weeks, so the attack was not launched until 15 March. Freyberg was still in place – a situation that Clark, much to his frustration, was unable to change, such were Allied politics. This time, Freyberg insisted on obliterating Cassino town with the same weight of bombs and shells Tuker had suggested for the mountain above. The town was destroyed but, instead of sending in overwhelming numbers of tanks and infantry immediately after, as Clark had instructed, a couple of battalions carefully inched into the town from



Mud, blood and floods Discover how tough conditions were for soldiers fighting at Monte Cassino in an interview with James Holland: *historyextra.com/monte-cassino-pod*

FINAL PUSH

Polish II Corps soldiers carry supplies up a rocky slope during the fight for Monte Cassino. On 18 May 1944, after months of bitter fighting, that unit finally secured the massif

one direction only. Overnight, the Germans reinforced – and the chance to sweep through the town was lost. What followed was a brutal attritional battle amid the ruins.

After this debacle, the New Zealand Corps was finally dissolved and Freyberg posted away from the immediate firing line. With the arrival of spring, the ground hardened. Alexander was able to bring his two armies side by side and, with the advantages in men and materials he had always wanted, on the night of 11 May he launched Operation Diadem. Monte Cassino fell on 18 May to the Polish II Corps in what was their first battle. It was the Poles, after their initial assault had failed, who finally discovered the secret of the figure-of-eight defences.

Once Monte Cassino was taken, the entrance to the strategically vital Liri Valley – and the route to the capital – was secured, and the Allies pushed rapidly north. Rome fell on 4 June.

Diadem was a great Allied victory – an operation that showed what could be achieved when skies were cleared, the ground was dry, and commanders had time to plan and prepare properly. Yet it is the earlier setbacks, and especially the images of the shattered abbey and the utterly obliterated town below, that continue to define the campaign in Italy, rather than the enormity of the victory two days before D-Day. The tragedy is that these dark stains on the campaign were so very avoidable. H

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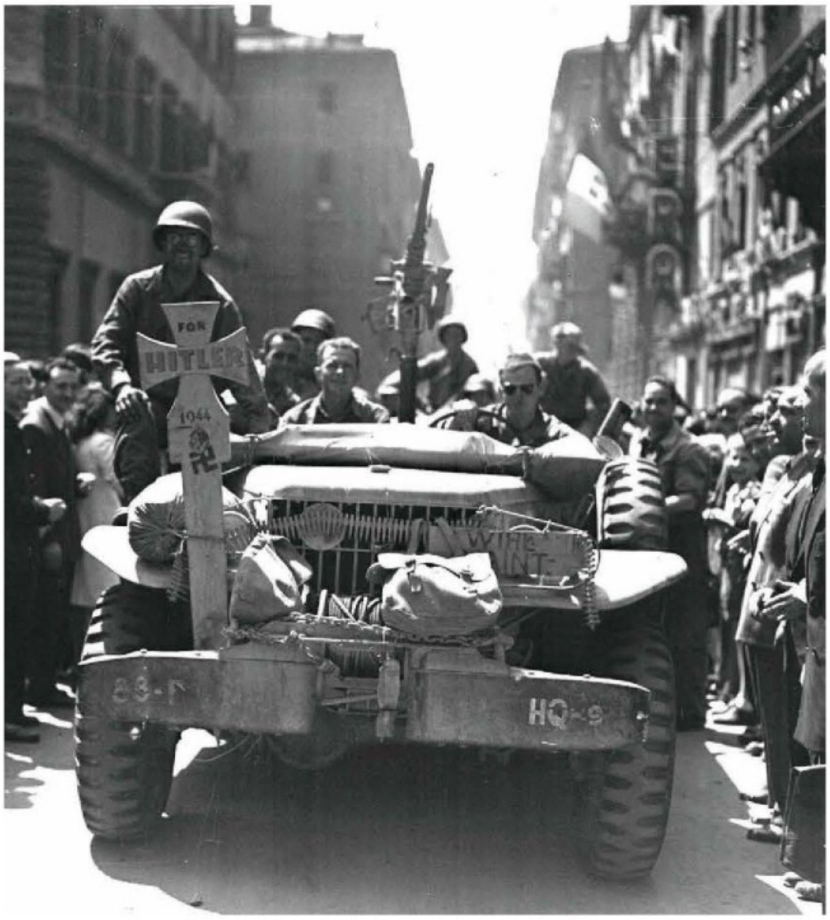
James Holland is a military historian. His latest book is *Cassino '44: Five Months of Hell in Italy* (Bantam, 2024)

Learn more about this pivotal battle in an episode of BBC World Service's **Witness History**: *bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p01plr3f*

BBC WORLD SERVICE



US troops in Rome on 4 June 1944, the day the Italian capital fell to the Allies – and just over two weeks after Monte Cassino had finally been taken

Q&A

A selection of historical **conundrums** answered by experts

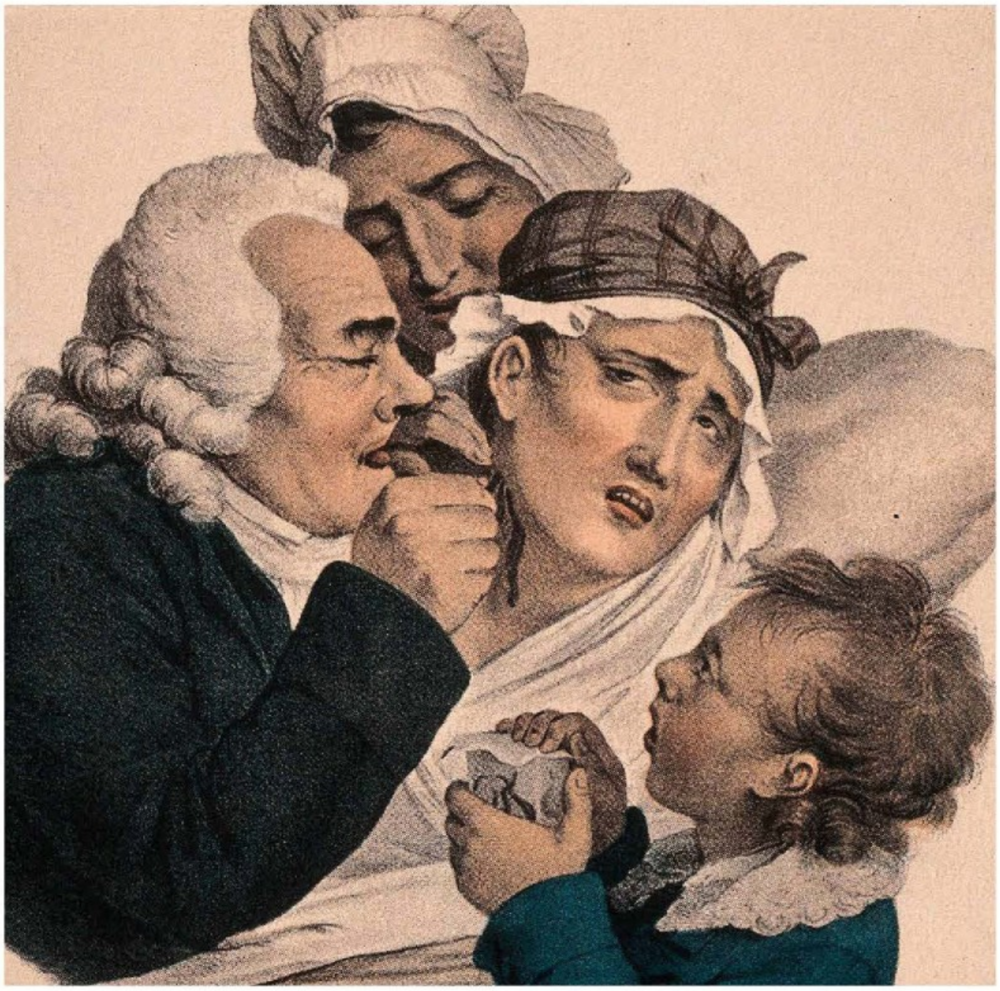
Why were leeches used to treat the sick?

››› Leeches were used for bloodletting, a treatment based on the humoral theory described by the Greek physicians Hippocrates (c460–370 BC) and Galen (AD 129–216). This model, which dominated understanding of illness and medicine for millennia, held that four body fluids – phlegm, blood, yellow bile and black bile – had to be in balance to maintain health.

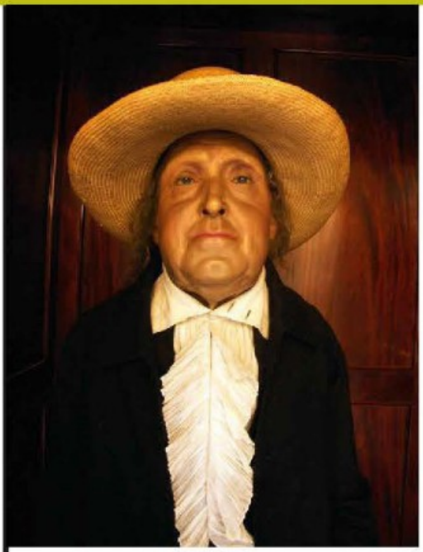
A patient whose skin was red from fever was believed to have too much blood, so letting would rebalance the proportions of body fluids and restore health. Whether treating skin disease, laryngitis, gout or even polio, leeching was a go-to remedy. It probably dates back even further, to ancient India and Egypt, where its use was recorded some 3,500 years ago. It reached a peak in the 19th century, then fell out of favour.

Leeches are still used medicinally, though. Since the 1980s, many plastic-surgery units have applied leeches to draw off excess blood and reduce congestion around wounds, thereby improving results. Leeches are clean, and even have an antibacterial effect.

Dr Carol Cooper, author of *The History of Medicine in Twelve Objects* (Aurum, 2024)



A physician administers a leech in an illustration from 1827. For many centuries, bloodletting with leeches was used to rebalance body 'humours'



Philosopher Jeremy Bentham's 'auto-icon' is displayed in University College London – with a wax facsimile in place of his preserved head

What is Bentham's 'auto-icon'?

››› Jeremy Bentham was a gifted philosopher, considered to be the father of utilitarianism. And this was reflected in his wishes for his afterlife. In the will he wrote a week before his death (on 6 June 1832, aged 84), he bequeathed his body to his friend Dr Thomas Southwood Smith, along with instructions to have it dissected then preserved, stuffed and dressed in Bentham's clothes, positioned on a chair as if deep in thought, and placed in a display case.

He envisaged many utilitarian uses for his 'auto-icon', hoping that this would become a common practice. An auto-icon, he wrote, can "diminish the horrors of death", "set curiosity in motion", aid "medical education", save on funeral costs and act as a commemoration "better than a statue".

But Bentham's own auto-icon was not quite what he had hoped for. He had wanted his head to be mummified – for years carrying in his pocket the appropriate glass eyes for the job – but the process went badly wrong, leaving the skin disfigured and discoloured. Instead, a wax head had to suffice.

Bentham's auto-icon is now displayed at the entrance of the student centre at University College London (UCL), which acquired it in 1850. His poorly mummified head was reportedly stolen by students in 1975 before being ransomed back to UCL for a charity donation.

Jonny Wilkes, freelance writer

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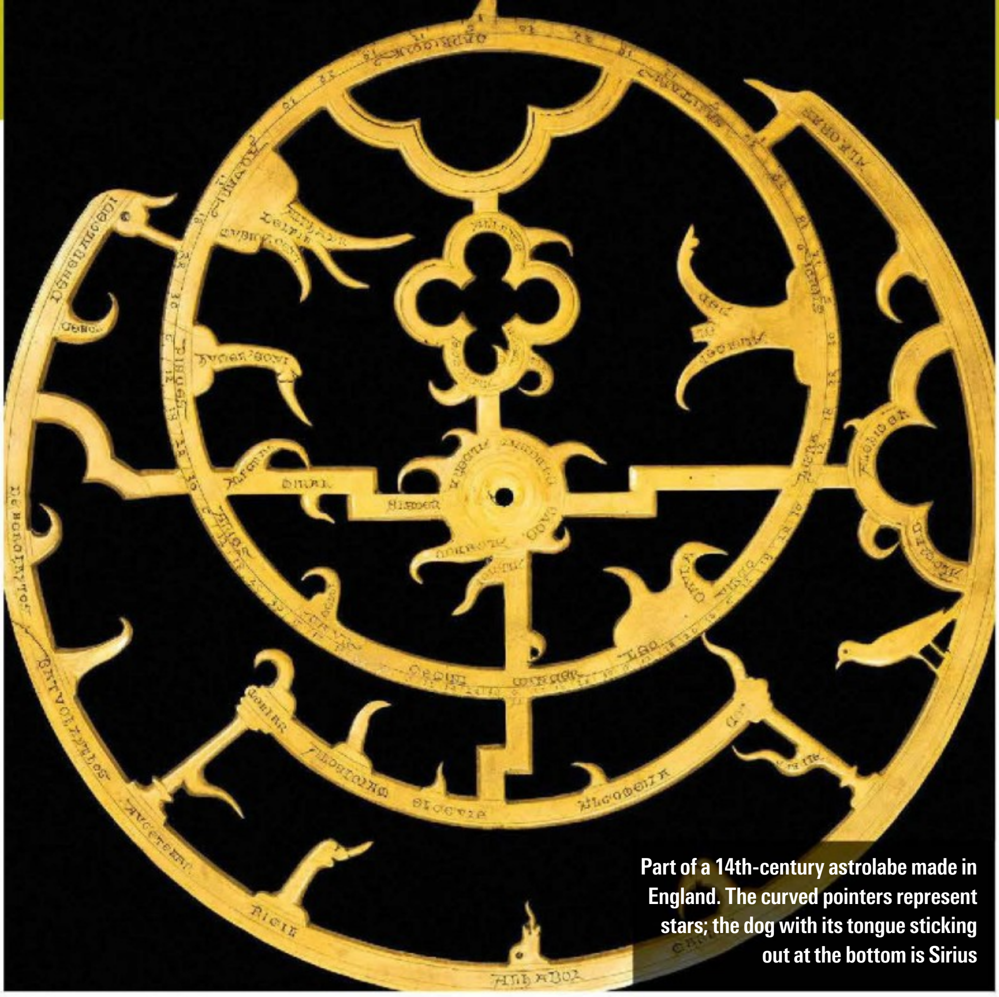


Part of a 14th-century astrolabe made in England. The curved pointers represent stars; the dog with its tongue sticking out at the bottom is Sirius

Was the astrolabe a medieval smartphone?

In a word: yes! Like a smartphone, it was a multifunctional device. Also like a phone, its functions were already available in existing instruments, but it incorporated them in a neat, portable package. Just as a smartphone combines a camera with a computer, a telephone and so on, an astrolabe brought together a sundial, a calendar, an inclinometer and a sophisticated model of the heavens.

The core of the astrolabe is that celestial model – a sky globe flattened into a disc, with moving parts making it an ingenious astronomical calculator. With it you can track the regular motions of the stars, and the irregular movements of the sun, moon and planets through the stars. Devised by ancient Greeks and developed in the Islamic world, its popularity spread fast: a medieval scholar in India enthused that "when you know the astrolabe well, you will know the universe like a fruit on the palm of your hand".

As with phones, manufacturers competed to make their products as attractive as possible to consumers in different markets. They added functions: tools to tell the time, to cast horoscopes, to survey the heights of buildings. Muslim craftsmen engraved lines for the five daily prayer times, while Christians etched them with calendars of saints' days and feast days.

Just as today, many users probably didn't use anything like the full range of functions. Experts wrote texts to make astrolabes more accessible – including the first 'dummies' guide' in English, penned by none other than Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote a *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, completed in 1391.

Also like smartphones, astrolabes ultimately became status symbols. Regardless of what you used them for, you could carry them around and show them off to your friends. They were beautiful and carefully crafted objects – the design classics of the Middle Ages.

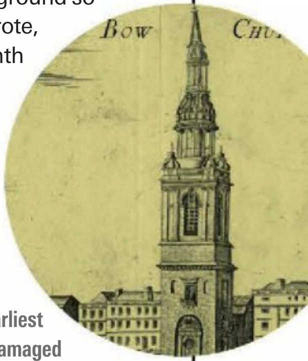
Seb Falk, fellow of Girton College, Cambridge and author of *The Light Ages: A Medieval Journey of Discovery* (Penguin, 2020)

SEB FALK/WHIPPLE MUSEUM-ACCESSION NUMBER WH.1264

DID YOU KNOW…?

A mighty wind

The first recorded tornado in England struck London in October 1091. According to the chronicler Florence of Worcester, "a violent whirlwind from the south-west shook and demolished 600 houses" in the city. Eight-metre-long roof timbers from the church of St Mary-le-Bow were flung into the air and driven into the ground so deeply, Florence wrote, "that only the seventh or eighth part of them was visible". Despite the tornado's violence, only two deaths were reported.



England's earliest recorded tornado damaged St Mary-le-Bow church in London

Medieval rainmakers

In weather folklore, the German equivalent to St Swithin's Day is Siebenschläfertag (Seven Sleepers' Day), 27 June. If rain falls that day, it is predicted to persist for the next seven weeks. In medieval legend, the Seven Sleepers were young men who converted to Christianity in the third century AD. They sought refuge from Roman persecution in a cave, where they slept for a decade – but, when they awoke, believed that only a day had passed.

Leap years

One of the greatest Olympic athletes of all time is largely forgotten today because he competed in events that haven't featured in the Games since 1912. The American Ray Ewry took eight gold medals between 1900 and 1908 – a record for a contestant in individual events that he held for 100 years. He won them in the standing jumps in disciplines that are still contested today (high jump, long jump and triple jump) – but in which athletes were not allowed any run-ups before leaping.

Ray Ewry competes in the standing high jump at the 1908 Olympic Games

Nick Rennison, writer and journalist specialising in history

…A bolt from the blue?

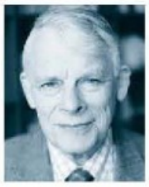
This expression, and its outdated variant 'a bolt out of the blue', mean exactly what they imply – a complete surprise. There are equivalent phrases in French and German, but with words for thunder (*tonnerre*) and lightning (*Blitz*) replacing bolt, respectively.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* credits Thomas Carlyle as the first to use the phrase 'a bolt out of the blue' in print, in his 1837 work *French Revolution*. He undoubtedly translated the idiom from German, a language he knew well and loved.

Even by the 1880s, though, the reference to a 'bolt' sounded strange to some readers. Educated English speakers discussed the idiom in the popular weekly *Notes and Queries*, in which many also expressed puzzlement at the use of the word 'blue' in the context of this phrase.

Indeed, the use of that colour in some phrases does sound enigmatic, unless the context is known. Think of 'true blue', meaning staunchly loyal, or simply the use of 'blues' to denote melancholy or depression. Then there's the now largely forgotten term 'blue pigeon flying', referring to the criminal theft of lead from church roofs.

Most of the discussions in *Notes and Queries* focused on meteorology, though. Can thunder actually occur under a clear sky? Frank Chance, a first-rate etymologist, pointed to the form of summer lightning – a phenomenon seen usually on the horizon of a clear and starlit sky, indicating a storm at such a distance that the clouds are not visible and the thunder is not heard.



Anatoly Liberman, professor and author of *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

ILLUSTRATION BY **GLEN McBETH**

Manhattan at sunset. New York City was first dubbed the 'Big Apple' more than a century ago

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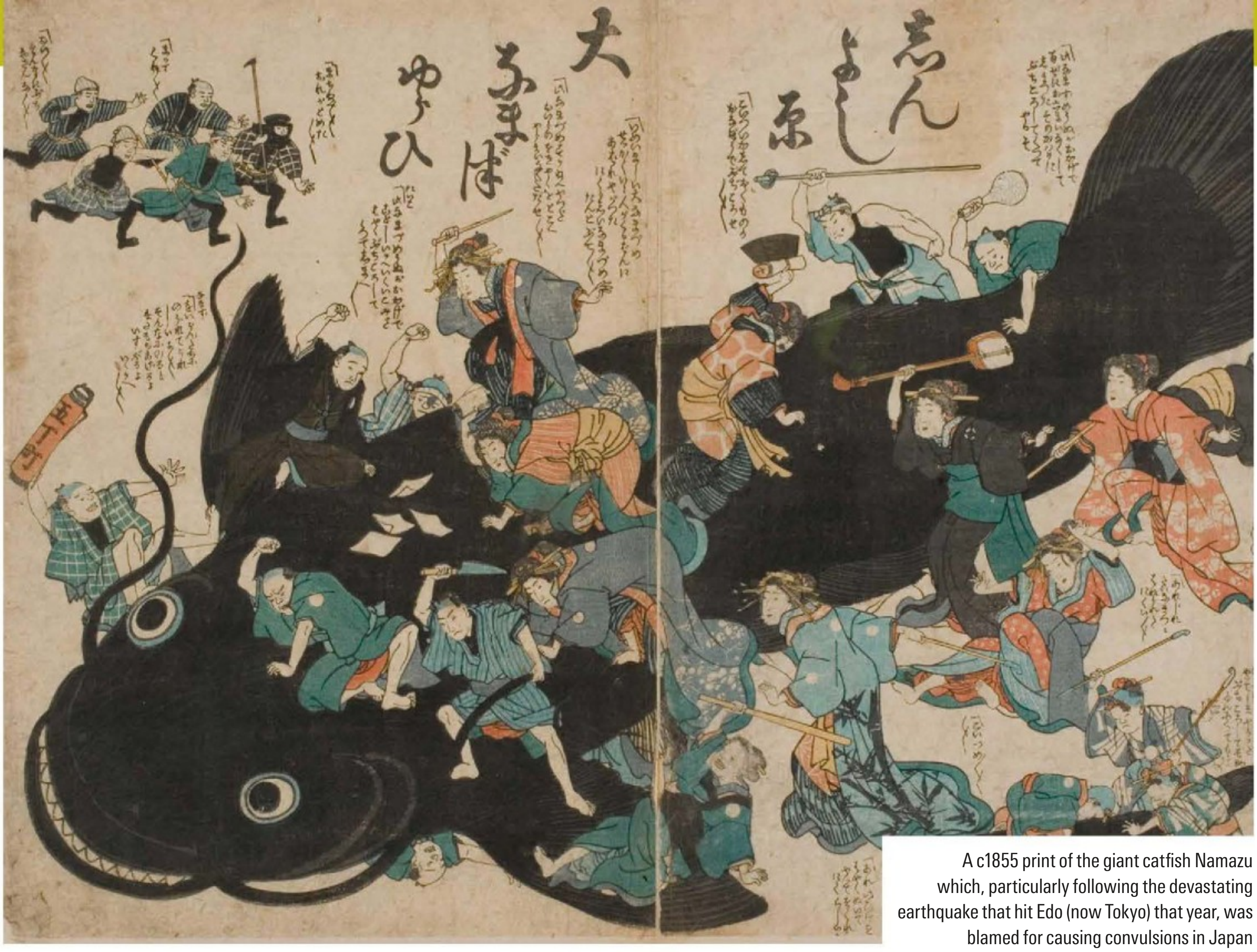
Why is New York City known as the 'Big Apple'?

In the 1970s, tourism chiefs latched onto this wholesome nickname in an effort to buff up the city's image, tarnished by high crime rates and economic woes. But the phrase was already being used at least half a century earlier. In 1921, sports reporter John J Fitz Gerald started referring to the 'Big Apple' in his horse-racing column for New York's *Morning Telegraph* newspaper. And in February 1924, he wrote: "There's only one Big Apple. That's New York." Over the years that followed, the expression became popular among jazz musicians in the city.

But Fitz Gerald wasn't the first to refer to the city as the Big Apple. More than a decade earlier, Edward S Martin wrote in the 1909 book *The Wayfarer in New York* that the midwest "inclines to think that the big apple [meaning New York] gets a disproportionate share of the national sap". Bear in mind, though, that through the early decades of the 20th century the term was used to describe any important city – in 1920, it was applied to Los Angeles, for example – or just something aspirational: Broadway, a medal, a major business deal.

That sense dates back further still, to the middle of the 19th century, when writers in New England spoke of wagering a 'big red apple'. But why that particular fruit? Well, that century marked a golden age of apple cultivation in the US, when it was a highly desirable fruit – hence the practice of giving one to a favoured teacher.

Paul Bloomfield, travel writer and host of our podcast series *History's Greatest Cities*



A c1855 print of the giant catfish Namazu which, particularly following the devastating earthquake that hit Edo (now Tokyo) that year, was blamed for causing convulsions in Japan

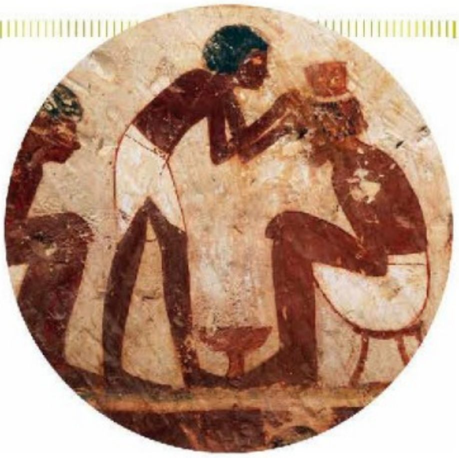
GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY

Why is a catfish blamed for earthquakes in Japan?

⋙ Japan is no stranger to earthquakes. It is shaken by some 1,500 tremors every year, and by 10 per cent of the world's seismic events over a magnitude of 6.

Long before the causes of such convulsions were explained by science, earthquakes in Japan were blamed on dragons. Around the 17th century, though, Japanese folk myth shifted responsibility to Namazu, a giant catfish that lived in subterranean rivers and caused earthquakes when it rubbed its body against rocks or thrashed its tail. The thunder god Takemikazuchi eventually managed to subdue Namazu by pinning down its head with a stone. Despite this, though, every now and again the troublesome catfish still wriggles about and causes destruction.

It was only in 1855 that the myth became embedded in the popular imagination. After a major earthquake hit Edo (now Tokyo), killing some 10,000, hundreds of woodblock prints of Namazu were produced. These *namazu-e* depicted the catfish not as a solely destructive force but a purifying one whose actions might bring about *yonaoshi* (world renewal) and counter social ills. So Namazu represented good fortune and the redistribution of wealth, reflecting the fact that the quake hit affluent parts of Edo, creating a lot of work for poor labourers and builders. ***JW***



A barber in an ancient Egyptian wall painting. Anyone with intimate access to pharaohs held high status

Who was the 'Shepherd of the Royal Anus'?

⋙ As job descriptions go, 'Shepherd of the Royal Anus' doesn't sound particularly pleasant – but it was in fact a high-ranking title in ancient Egypt.

There is only one known record of the phrase, in a hieroglyphic inscription from the 4,100-year-old tomb of Iry-en-akhet, next to the Great Pyramid at Giza. It appears on a false door in the tomb alongside other titles relating to healing practices associated with the king's palace. The literal translation is 'Herdsman (or Guardian) of the Back Parts', and a modern equivalent of the role might be proctologist.

Anyone with intimate access to the person of the pharaoh – people fulfilling functions we might label barber, dentist, manicurist and so on – all held special status. Some officials even boasted about being allowed to kiss the royal foot instead of the ground in front of the king. Claiming to have access to the royal backside – in the manner of the original function of the 'groom of the stool' in the Tudor court – was a way of boasting of the favour of the ruler.

Campbell Price, curator of Egypt and Sudan at Manchester Museum, University of Manchester

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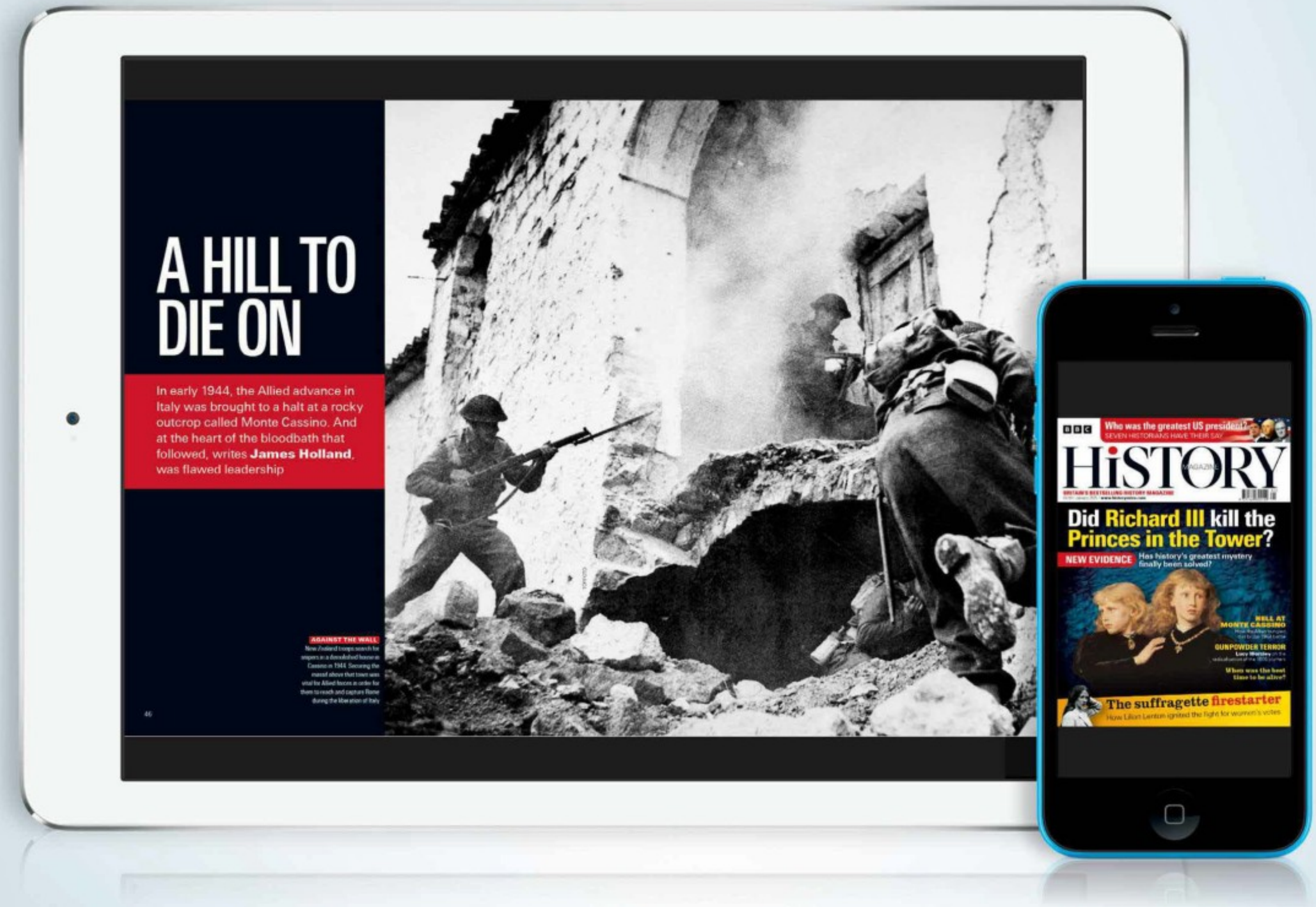
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Lilian Lenton
The Elusive Pimpernel

Some suffragettes marched with banners, or printed and distributed propaganda pamphlets. Others took more direct action. **DIANE ATKINSON** tells the story of one activist who employed arson to spark awareness of the burning issue of women's suffrage

Recalling her career as a suffragette arsonist and Houdini-like escapologist in interviews later in her life, Lilian Lenton lit up as if a fire had been started in her heart.

"To say I enjoyed making fires sounds rather awful," she later admitted. "But it really was lovely to find that you'd been successful – that the thing really had burned down and that you hadn't got caught. There it was blazing, and there we were in the glare of the lights…"

Lilian Ida Lenton was one of the youngest, yet most militant, of suffragettes in the three years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War. Her suffragette career was daring, dangerous and dramatic, reported in newspapers around the country. The new half-penny dailies, with their half-tone photographs and full spreads, often featured her pyrotechnic activities.

Lilian was 5ft 2ins tall in her stockinged feet, with brown hair and eyes – a "tiny, china-like figure, but wiry and… wily". She soon gained a romantic nickname, 'The Elusive Pimpernel', for her effective disguises and her ability to elude the policemen and detectives who guarded the places where she was kept under house arrest while released from prison on licence. With her tiny stature, she easily passed as a child, a delivery boy or a little old lady.

Born in Leicester in 1891, Lilian was the eldest of the five children of Isaac, a carpenter and joiner, and Mahalah, who had worked in a hosiery factory before her marriage. Lilian trained as a dancer, but was then inspired by hearing Emmeline Pankhurst speak about women's suffrage. As soon as she was "21 and my own boss", she joined the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU).

> " Food had been forced into Lilian's lungs, and she soon developed double pneumonia and pleurisy "

Lilian was first arrested on 4 March 1912, one of about 200 detained during a campaign of window-smashing. Frustrated at the government's refusal to give women the vote, and outraged at the force-feeding of suffragettes in prison, activists shattered hundreds of windows in Whitehall and the West End of London. Emmeline Pankhurst called these raids the "argument of the broken pane".

Under the alias Ida Inkley, Lilian was sentenced to two months in Holloway Prison for smashing the windows of the Oxford Street Post Office. The sentencing magistrate commented that "only very ill-regulated minds could conceive of such ideas".

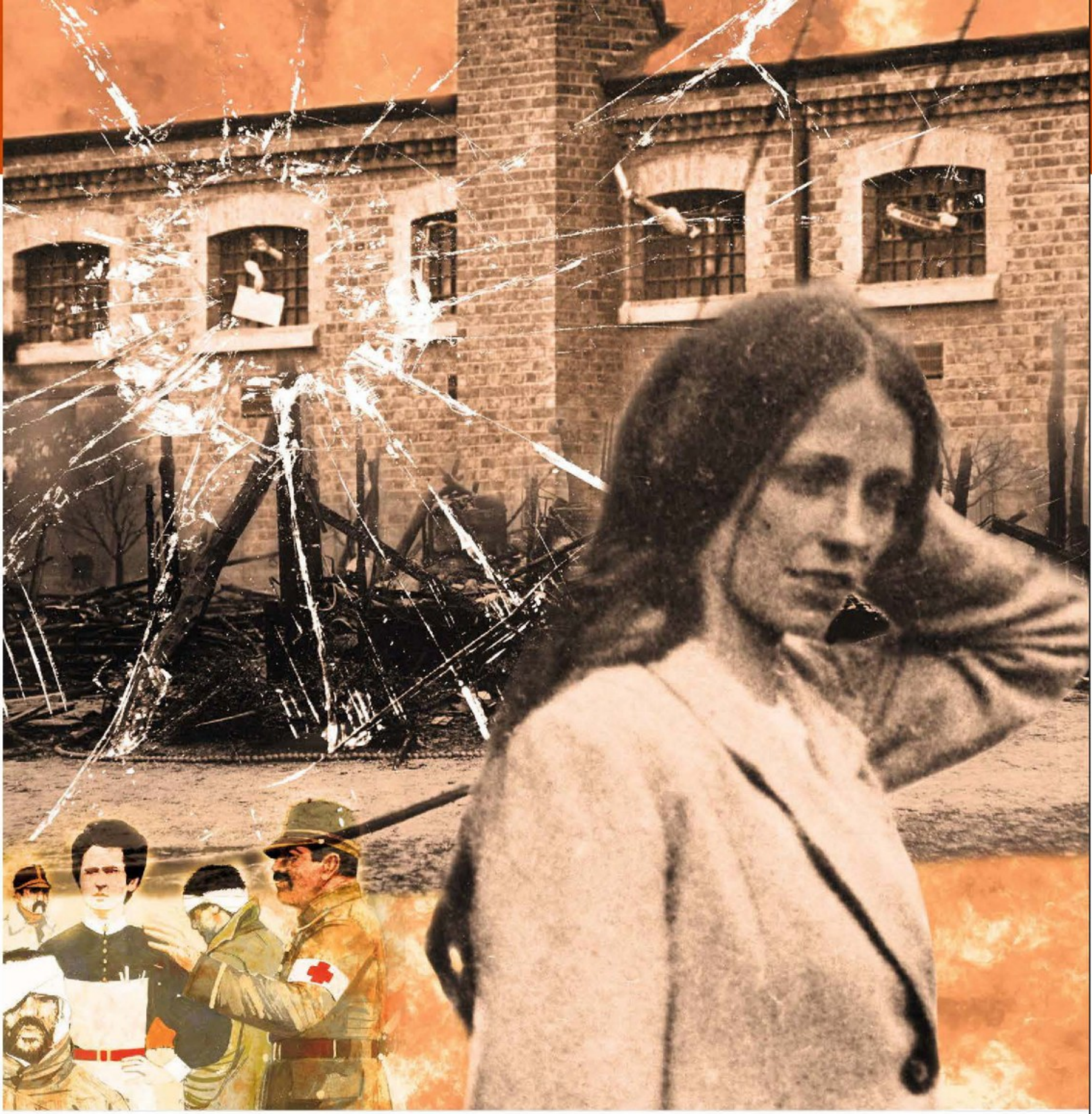
Lilian was rarely out of the news in 1913. Telling WSPU headquarters that she wanted to progress from breaking windows, she declared that her mission was to burn down two empty buildings each week. At three o'clock on the morning of 20 February, she and a comrade, artist Olive Wharry, set fire to the tea pavilion at Kew Gardens – which was reduced to a heap of ashes. They left postcards at the scene from "Two voteless women", offering "Peace on earth and goodwill when women get the vote", then ran off – but dropped two suitcases containing a hammer and their combustible materials. They were rapidly apprehended by two policemen, denied bail and taken to Holloway Prison.

Forcible feeding

Lilian refused to be medically examined or to "give any particulars". She was moved to a special cell after she "smashed up everything in the cell she was first placed in", and was kept apart from all other suffragette prisoners. She was well aware of the fate that would likely befall her.

"When I went to prison for fires, I knew the sentences would go into years," Lilian later recalled during an interview with the BBC. "So I went on hunger strike for release, on the grounds they had no right to imprison women for breaking man-made laws. The forcible feeding process was extremely unpleasant. But some people managed to put up with it literally for months – which meant hundreds of times."

On 23 February 1913, it happened to Lilian. "They



BRIDGEMAN/NATIONAL ARCHIVES/DREAMSTIME/GETTY IMAGES/TOPFOTO

Born to working-class parents in Leicester, Lilian Lenton channelled her boundless energy first into dance but then, inspired by Emmeline Pankhurst, into suffragette activism and, later, nursing work during the First World War

COLLAGE BY **RACHEL DICKENS**

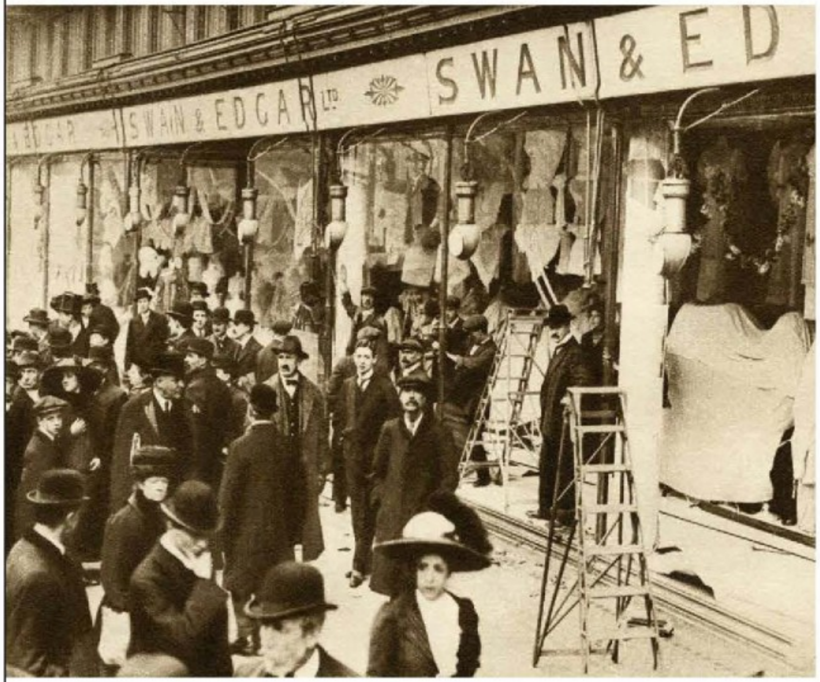
pushed a tube up the nostril, which went wriggling down into the stomach," she later recalled. "Then they poured the food in through the funnel at the end of the tube. But I was determined to stop them if I could. All the time they were trying to push this tube down, I kept coughing and coughing incessantly. They kept on trying, and after a bit I suppose they thought they'd succeeded, because they poured the food in… In almost no time I felt intense pain all round my chest and I could not breathe."

Food had been forced into Lilian's lungs, and she soon developed double pneumonia and pleurisy as a result. She was released from Holloway's hospital wing and taken to the home of suffragette friends in north London, where she was kept under house arrest. One day, a laundry van arrived at the house. The driver was a female friend in disguise, and the laundry basket carried out was suspiciously heavy – because the extra weight was Lilian Lilian. She was whisked away, "leaving a squad of lynx-eyed detectives industriously watching an empty nest".

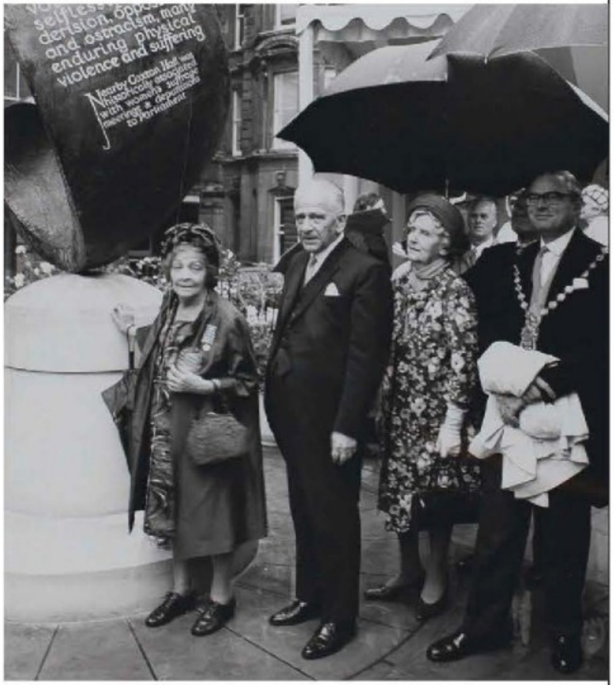
Cat and mouse

Stories of women being force-fed created adverse publicity for the Liberal government, and in April 1913 the Prisoners (Temporary Discharge for Ill-Health) Act was passed. Under its terms, hunger-striking suffragettes would not be fed by force; instead, they were released when their weight dropped dangerously low, and were served with a licence specifying that they should remain at a pre-agreed address. If they then regained weight, they would be returned to prison. The suffragettes likened it to a game of cat and

Deeds not words
Learn more about the suffragettes on our podcast series featuring Diane Atkinson: *historyextra.com/suffragettes-series*



Broken windows front the Swan and Edgar department store at Piccadilly Circus, among hundreds of sites in London targeted by suffragettes



Lilian Lenton (left) at the unveiling of the Suffragette Memorial in London in 1970 – the last known picture of this stalwart activist

mouse, and the act failed spectacularly. Very few 'mice' were ever recaptured; instead, most went on the run and committed more militant acts. Force-feeding was reintroduced in the autumn of 1913.

After evading authorities earlier that year, Lenton laid low until June, when 'May Dennis' (another alias) was found by a local reporter in a burning building in Doncaster. She managed to escape, but gave herself up when she read that a servant had been charged with arson. Lilian was sentenced to six months in Armley Gaol (now HM Prison Leeds); again she went on hunger strike, but this time was not force-fed. She was released on licence after seven days to the home of local suffragette sympathisers, effectively under house arrest.

Though under close observation, Lilian escaped from under the noses of the police keeping watch on the house, this time disguised as a delivery boy carrying a hamper. She spent the rest of the summer dressed as a boy, on the run between Harrogate and Dundee, evading the Special Branch and other police officers who were hunting for her. She then disguised herself as an old lady, hobbling through Cardiff to escape by train to London. From there she travelled to Dover, where she boarded a yacht owned by a suffragette sympathiser and fled to France.

Returning to England, during the autumn of 1913 and spring of 1914 Lilian was hugely active. She continued to burn empty buildings and, when arrested, went on three hunger-and-thirst-strikes; each time she was released and then evaded police.

When the First World War began in August 1914, the government granted an amnesty to all suffragette prisoners on the understanding that their militancy would end. Lilian diverted her energies to other important work, first as an orderly for Dr Elsie Inglis's Scottish Women's Hospital Unit in Serbia; she received a medal from the French Red Cross for her efforts. After the war she took a role at the British embassy in Stockholm, and went to Russia with the Save the Children Fund, which had been founded in 1919. She also worked as the financial secretary of the National Union of Women Teachers and, in her final years, was the honorary treasurer of the Suffragette Fellowship, founded in 1926 to keep alive the memory of the militant campaign.

The earliest surviving photographs of Lilian show her lying in bed in prison, recovering from force-feeding; there are also surveillance images taken by Special Branch officers. The last known picture of her was taken in 1970 at the unveiling of the Suffragette Memorial in London's Christchurch Gardens near Caxton Hall, which had been the venue of the 'Women's Parliament' held in 1907. She had led the fundraising for the memorial.

Lilian Lenton died in 1972, after 60 years of activism dedicated to improving the lives of women. H

> " Lilian escaped from under the noses of the police keeping watch, disguised as a delivery boy carrying a hamper "

Diane Atkinson is a historian and author. Her latest book is *Rise Up, Women! The Remarkable Lives of the Suffragettes* (Bloomsbury, 2018)

Watch a 1960 interview with Lilian Lenton on **BBC Archive**, in which she describes some of her escapades, at *bbc.co.uk/videos/c72p2n2479go*

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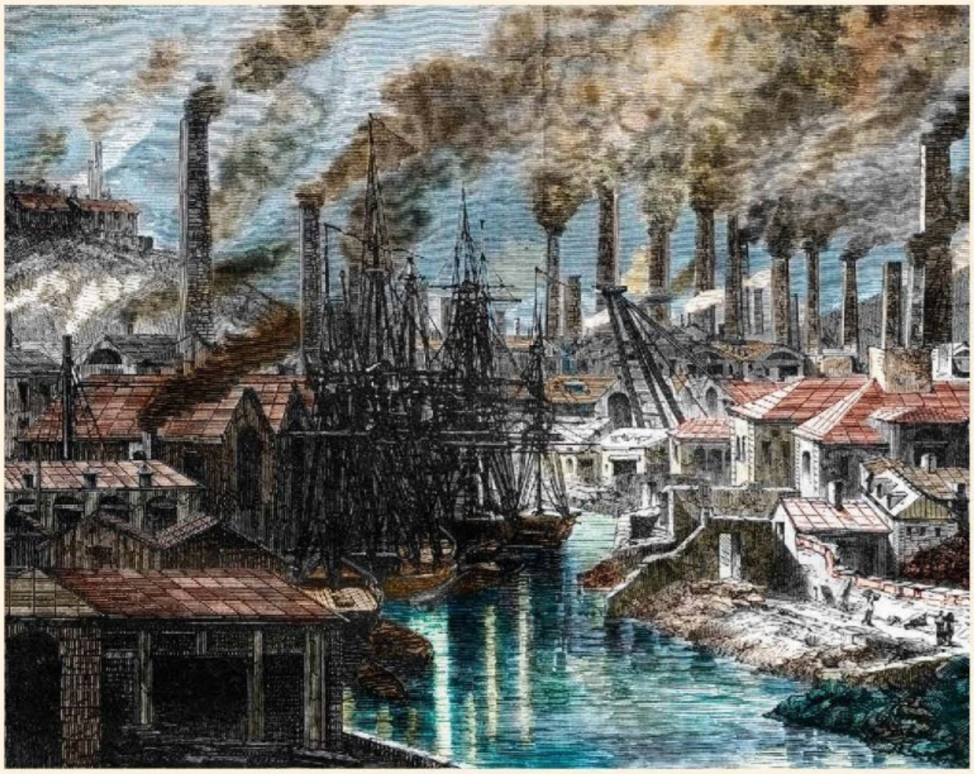


Dirty money Cornish copper factories belch out pollution in an engraving from 1887. Rapid technological innovation in the 18th and 19th centuries produced vastly more wealth, yet it also brought soaring inequality

Was there a best time to be alive?

It's human nature to look at the past through rose-tinted glasses. But can any age truly be considered golden?

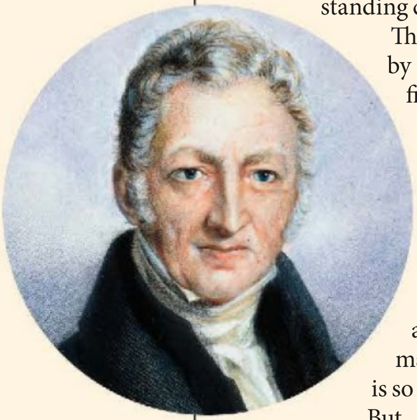
BY **ROBERT BLACKMORE**

BRIDGEMAN

In the beginning, life was perfect. That, at least, was what our ancient antecedents believed. In c700 BC, mirroring the biblical Eden, the Greek poet Hesiod told how people "lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote from toil and grief". Some seven centuries later, Hesiod's Roman successor Ovid recounted in his *Metamorphoses* how "the formation of man is followed by a succession of the four ages of the world. The first is the golden age, during which innocence and justice alone govern."

Were Hesiod and Ovid on to something? Was the dawn of humanity the best time to be alive? Historians rarely agree on anything, least of all whether things were going well for people in a past society. Were they good or bad times? Were they getting better or worse? Politicians and journalists frame the present in these terms. We, too, sense the ups and downs of our own lives. But can this apply to history? Should historians assess an age in the same way?

Some might flat-out reject value judgments and insist we only appraise a time by its own standards. Culturally at least, this works. Yet the increase of interest in social and economic history since the mid-20th century has made discussion of the relative prosperity of past societies more relevant than it had been with, for example, constitutional history. Furthermore, such questions seem especially crucial to public history. We want to understand the differences and similarities between our lives and those who came before. History is, more than anything, about understanding change.



Thomas Malthus argued that poverty was inescapable, as increasing population would always outpace production

ALAMY

Then there's the problem of what we mean by 'good' or 'bad' times. How do we define 'prosperity'? This depends on your priorities, but little could be more important than basic material living standards. How well were people fed, clothed and housed? How robust was their health and security? Of course, beyond modest survival, quality of life is a far harder thing to articulate, both in a material and immaterial sense. In history, as today, little is so hard to measure as happiness.

But, from the start – even in elementary terms – our estimations of good or bad times are frustratingly at odds. The Neolithic Revolution (beginning c10,000 BC), the gradual adoption of sedentary agriculture by formerly hunter-gatherer societies, was once presented as a positive step forward. In the long run, it was what allowed humanity to create 'civilisation' – that is to say, complex, densely populated societies with cities, governments, bureaucracies and armies supposedly representing shelter, safety and comfort. This was, surely, an improvement on what came before, if life had previously been, as the 17th-century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes thought, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short".

In the next century, however, another thinker, the Swiss-born Jean-Jacques Rousseau, famously considered such a "state of nature" superior. Akin to Hesiod and Ovid, Rousseau saw the deep past as a golden age corrupted by all that came after it. This was a view significantly advanced in the 1960s by American anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, whose 'Original Affluent Society' of hunter-gatherers ate better and had more leisure time than we do today. Yet many researchers have since confirmed that many such societies could also be extraordinarily violent – both between and within groups – with the killing of children and the elderly widely practised.

In 1798, the English scholar and Anglican cleric Thomas Malthus presented a stark vision of life that seemed to explain this conflict. In his view, the production of resources was limited by the availability of land, so could only increase incrementally. But population sizes tend to rise exponentially, meaning societies would always experience poverty and are "condemned to a perpetual oscillation between happiness and misery" as they repeatedly reached the carrying capacity of their environments.

A Malthusian interpretation of the past requires acceptance of uncomfortable ideas. Not least, that events that lowered the population – such as disease and violence – might have been good in history, that the pain and suffering we seek to avoid, might have been necessary. When the dust settled, it is argued, the survivors ended up with more resources per person.

But is this really the whole story? Aside from the obvious advantages to those concerned of not being dead, surely there are broader benefits to having more people. A larger group might compete more successfully against smaller ones for resources. It might win wars and expand further. But, most importantly, it might not all be a zero-sum game. More people generally meant more collective intelligence, and so more creativity, innovation and, eventually, technological breakthroughs. Some argue that the very size of the human population is itself directly linked to the complexity of human societies.

Time and again, we find differing perspectives. The subjectivity of historians themselves is problematic, and we European historians often tend to offer an overly Eurocentric perspective. Our predecessors during the colonial era used to admire classical civilisations such as the Roman empire as model societies to be emulated. In the late 18th

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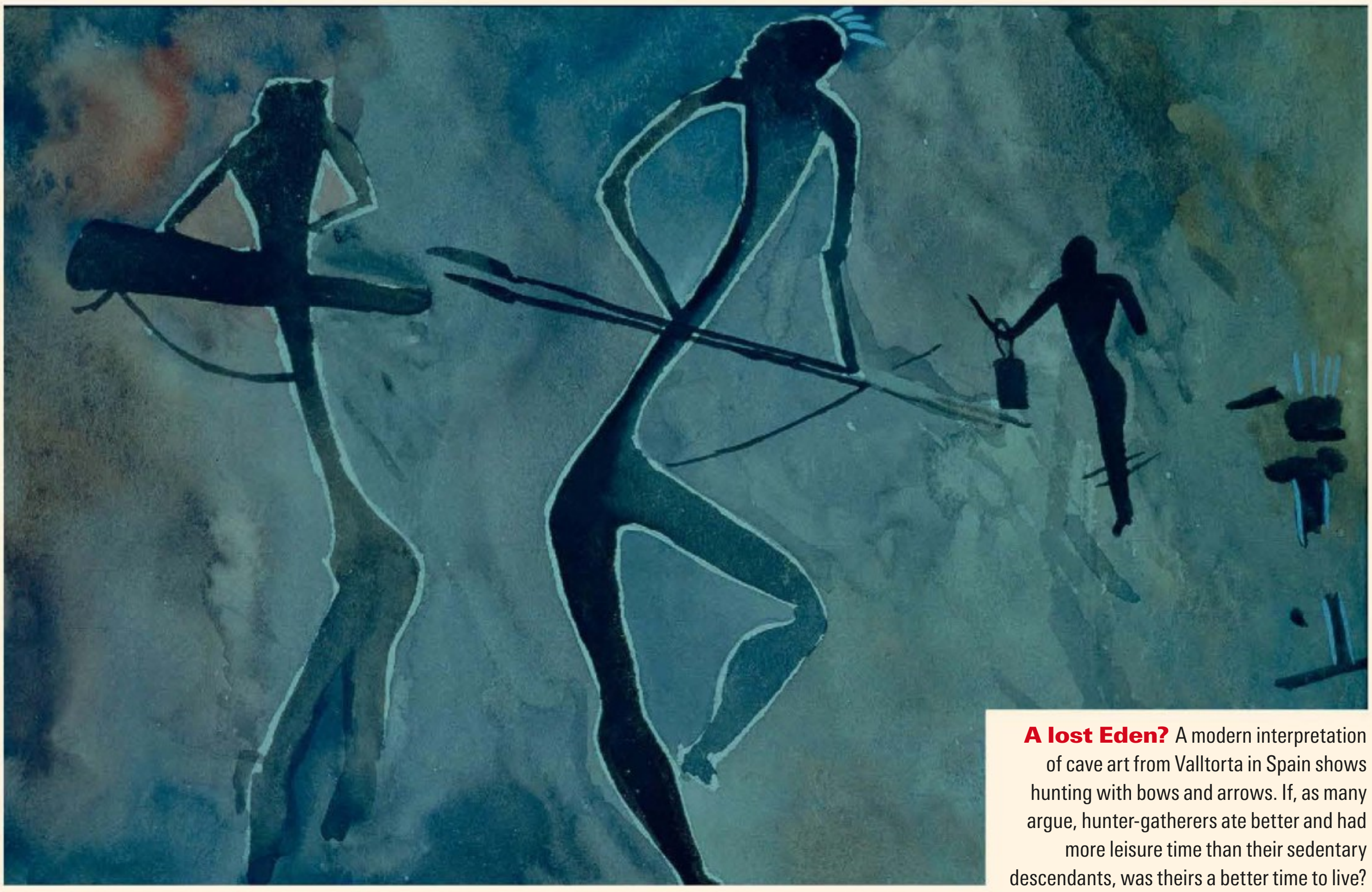


A lost Eden? A modern interpretation of cave art from Valltorta in Spain shows hunting with bows and arrows. If, as many argue, hunter-gatherers ate better and had more leisure time than their sedentary descendants, was theirs a better time to live?

TOPFOTO

century, the British historian Edward Gibbon considered the years AD 96–180 to have been ancient Rome's golden age. It was there and then, he said, that "the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous".

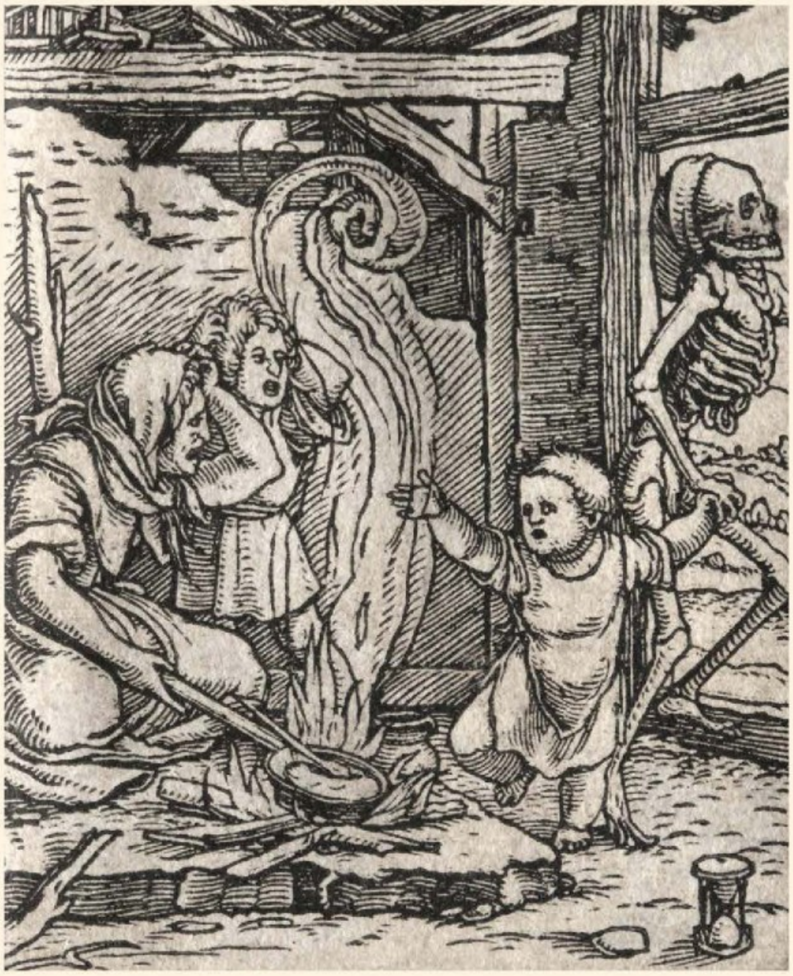
Some of Rome's achievements are manifest in its surviving art, architecture and literature – if those are your measures. Yet, archaeological evidence from skeletal remains suggests the average standard of living in the empire was lowest precisely when it was most successful, during the *Pax Romana*, the 'Roman Peace'. Life was probably far better in the empire's western half after its 'fall' in the fifth century AD, during the so-called 'Dark Ages'. One 2021 study showed that people in Roman Gaul were shorter, and their bones presented more signs of physiological stress, than in the post-Roman period – the result of more exposure to disease in childhood and overcrowded urban living.

At issue here is clearly also inequality: it mattered who you were. In complex hierarchical societies, elites could dominate resource extraction and distribution and so raise their level of prosperity well above non-elites, whose material existence remained barely above subsistence. In Europe, for example, you nearly always did better if you were rich, white, free and a man – as Gibbon was. Almost all surviving Roman archaeological sites, from Pompeii to Palmyra, provide ample evidence of how well the empire's aristocracy and provincial elites lived. But for many, not least Rome's vast enslaved workforce, life would hardly have been so "happy and prosperous".

Yet with inequality arose cycles in the relative prosperity of different groups when populations rose and fell. Perhaps the most famous example of this was the so-called 'crisis' of the late Middle Ages in Europe, roughly 1300 to 1500. The preceding centuries saw considerable economic growth, an expansion in population, and, with it, spectacular architecture – such as Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals – as well as a great revival of art, philosophy and literature.

Subsequently, in the 14th century, came a series of disasters. First there was the Great Famine of 1315–17/22; then, from the 1347–51 Black Death pandemic, repeated waves of plague. These struck alongside near constant

> **❝ Life in western Europe probably got better during the 'Dark Ages', after the 'fall' of Rome**



Grim tidings A Hans Holbein woodcut from c1526 shows a child doing the 'dance of death'. Despite the glamour of the Tudor court, this was a period wracked by plague and poverty

warfare, not least the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) between England and France. *A Distant Mirror*, American historian Barbara Tuchman's 1978 account of this period, is famously subtitled 'the Calamitous 14th Century'. This leaves little doubt as to her assessment.

Nevertheless, some historians have recast the late Middle Ages as almost a golden age. Those who survived the wars, plagues and famines appear to have become more prosperous on average – materially at least – than their forebears. The European population halved and, as such, there was more land to go around: and thus, more abundant resources per head. With fewer workers, those who remained were able to attain higher wages and lower rents. Demand for meat and finer clothing increased among the general population. In some places, there was a decline in serfdom.

> **"Is it right to attribute a high standard of 'living' to a period when half of all people are dead?**

In 2017, Austrian historian Walter Scheidel took perhaps the most pessimistic view of this. He surveyed much of history: from the collapse of late Bronze Age societies of the Middle East and southern Europe in the 12th century BC right through to the revolutions and 'total war' of the 20th century. And the thoroughly disheartening conclusion he reached was that mortality from pandemic disease, violent revolutions and the collapse of states were the only truly effective ways that inequality reduced historically.

But, again, is prosperity amid mass death how we'd genuinely define a 'good time'? Is it right to attribute a high standard of 'living' to a period when half of all people, your loved ones included, are dead?

If truth be told, the main problem with our interpretation of good and bad times is our inability to absorb the full complexity of any historical period. The past involved a mass of individual and collective human experiences, which only survive in fragments. We struggle to make sense of this confusion until we conjure it into orderly narratives of rises and falls.

This is how we humans deal with a complicated, changing world: by ordering our memories into stories. We write history the same way: mirroring the same ups and downs in our own lives. There is no reason to assume these necessarily render an accurate interpretation of the past as a whole. As William Shakespeare had Hamlet tell Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in c1600, "there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so".

Indeed, our view of Shakespeare's own times contains especially glaring incongruities. He was born in 1564, during a century in which the late medieval trend of population decline in Europe reversed, and its explorers, traders and conquerors spread around the globe. This time saw a surge in economic growth, with an increase in the scale and complexity of societies. But prosperity was very unevenly distributed.

In England, the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) is exceptionally revered. A 2007 film was even titled *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*. Developments in theatre and poetry, and even the greater use of domestic comforts like chimneys, may have been significant. Yet, average real income dropped by almost all measures. Poverty and destitution reached a level not seen in the Middle Ages. What's more, plague never went away, and struck repeatedly, as in London in 1592–93. There were also food shortages, with harvest failures for four years running from 1594 to 1598.

The later propaganda value of England's resistance to foreign aggression during the 1585-1604 Anglo-Spanish War - particularly the famous 1588 Armada - may have clouded our view. So has the perceived glamour of the Tudor court. However, even here, you were in danger of meeting a sticky end on an executioner's block.

These were both good and bad times then, we think. But by Shakespeare's own death, in 1616, much had certainly

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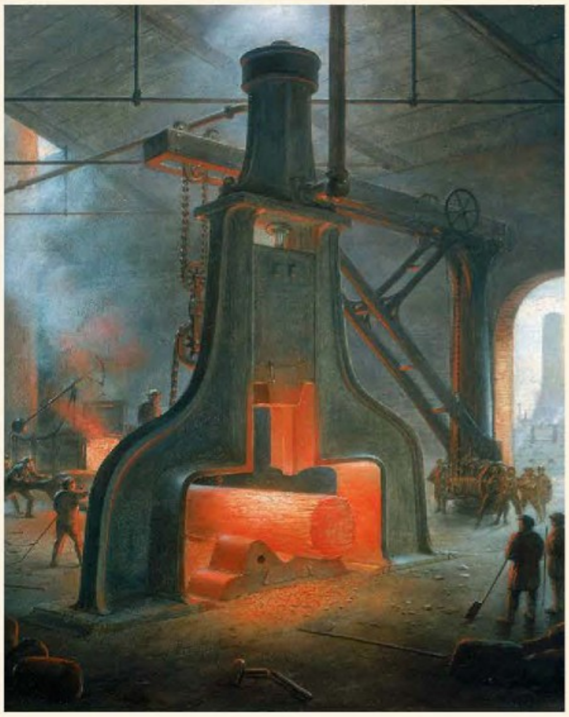
Casualty figures A wounded man in a trench during the First World War. The 20th century saw industrialised militaries fight war on an unprecedented scale. Yet as a proportion of the world population, fewer people met violent deaths changed – and was continuing to do so. The 17th century, it is now argued, laid the groundwork for the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries, as agriculture commercialised, and manufacturing jobs began to proliferate. Yet the move from a largely agrarian to an industrial society is as controversial as that of the hunter-gatherer to sedentary agriculturalist many millennia earlier. As Charles Dickens famously began *A Tale of Two Cities*, published in 1859: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."

Rapid technological innovation combined with massive new energy inputs – the burning of fossil fuels – to spectacularly increase the efficiency of the economies of first Britain, then Europe, America and the world. Human societies were able – at least for a time – to escape the growth and population limits envisaged by Malthus. Vastly more material wealth was generated than ever before. Simultaneously, whole communities and ways of life were torn apart as former agricultural workers moved into towns and cities in search of jobs in industry.

While advantageous for some, working conditions, diet and housing for many was sufficiently appalling to inspire countless activists to action, not least Dickens himself, and the German philosopher Karl Marx. Ideologies like socialism and nationalism grew in response to the uncertainties that arose from such rapid change.

Meanwhile, industrialised militaries permitted European empires to further dominate and exploit the rest of the world. Conflict, particularly into the 20th century, was waged on an unparalleled scale. Yet strangely, this may have been both the most and least bloody century in history. In absolute terms, the greatest number of people met violent deaths. But such was the increase in world population, in relative terms, the fewest did. What's more, as French economist Thomas Piketty pointed out in 2013, these wars themselves went a long way towards eliminating the massive economic inequality of the industrial age. Though admittedly as much a levelling down as a levelling up, nothing is more efficient at destroying factories, railways and fortunes than mechanised warfare and taxes to pay for it.



Hotting up A steam hammer in a Lancashire foundry, 1832. The industrial revolution removed the limits on wealth and population that had restricted growth in previous centuries

> **"The modern world is neither better nor worse than previous centuries. There's just more of everything**

But can we really present horrendous events, such as the Second World War, with its associated atrocities, positively? To do so would appear an affront to the many millions who died: sacrificed at the altar of nations.

By almost all measures, human societies are now – in the 21st century – richer, more complex, more interconnected and more technologically advanced than at any other time in history. Yet immense inequality has also returned, both within and between societies. And while our total population is predicted to peak, the effects of modern economies on the environment, not least greenhouse gas emissions and resultant runaway climate change, are immense.

The interaction between humans and their surroundings is complicated. Much of history has now had some long-term climactic change associated with it. We have arguably always shaped our planet, as we ourselves are in turn shaped by it – but no more so than now. So, this is no golden age either.

It is nostalgia for a lost time that leads us, like Hesiod and Ovid, to see earlier periods of history, where we perceive our beginnings – like our youth – as 'golden'. In reality, there are few entirely good or bad times: most are a fusion of both. The modern world is neither better nor worse. There's just more of everything.

We struggle with this idea because we cannot think outside of our own storytelling nature. It is possible that, in a future with powerful artificial intelligence-driven tools, we may be able to escape these limits to our imagination and see past societies as closer to what they really were. But, with the ecological overreach and consequent threat of our extinction involved in reaching that technological complexity, it may well be that we will experience one perfect sunrise, before we finally sink back into the darkness. H

Dr Robert Blackmore is a historian and a visiting fellow at the University of Southampton

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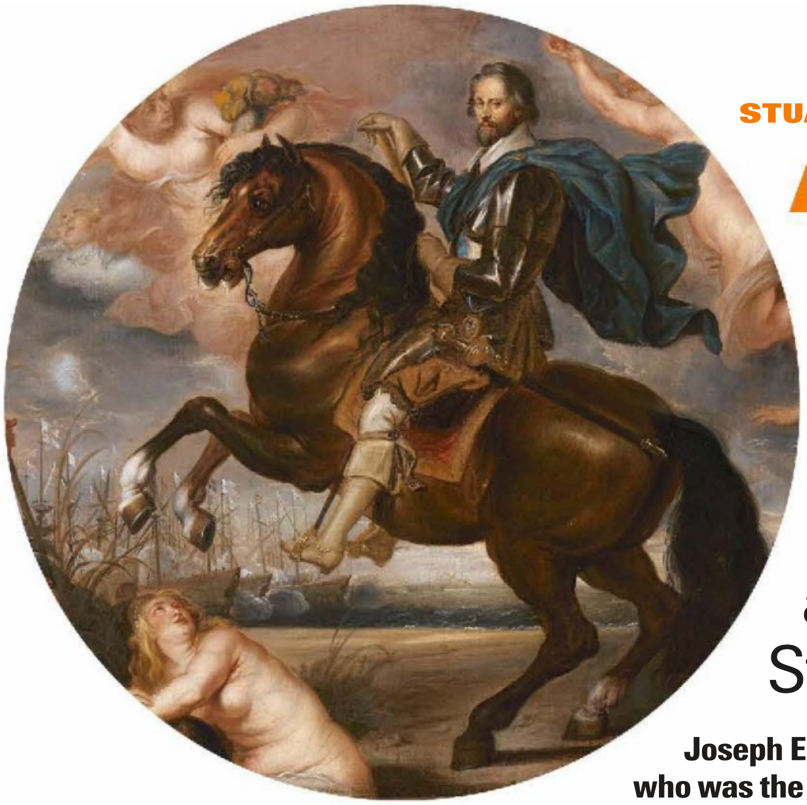
BOOKS

ESPIONAGE

“This narrative is one of adventure and opportunity, as well as injustice”

Kate Vigurs enjoys an exploration of women’s roles in Britain’s intelligence services › page 77



STUARTS

“Buckingham emerges from *Scapegoat* as a multi-faceted character sacrificed in the brutal cut and thrust of Stuart politics”

Joseph Ellis devours a new biography of a man who was the favourite of two Stuart kings › page 74

ANCIENT EGYPT

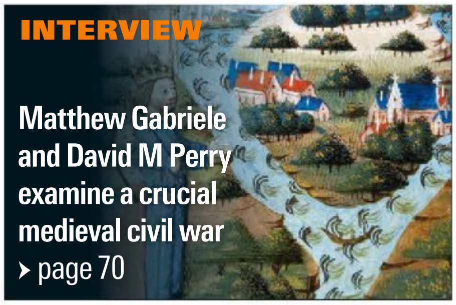
“Toby Wilkinson has made a valuable contribution to Hellenistic scholarship”

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones considers a new history of the Ptolemaic dynasty › page 76

POLITICAL

“This stands out as the best single-volume analysis of Kennedy’s life and presidency”

Iwan Morgan lauds an impressive new biography of JFK › page 78



INTERVIEW

Matthew Gabriele and David M Perry examine a crucial medieval civil war
› page 70

GETTY IMAGES/DR CLAIRE HUBBARD-HALL

INTERVIEW / MATTHEW GABRIELE & DAVID M PERRY

"The battle created reverberations that lasted for generations"

MATTHEW GABRIELE and **DAVID M PERRY** talk to David Musgrove about the ninth-century civil war among Charlemagne's grandsons that reshaped Europe

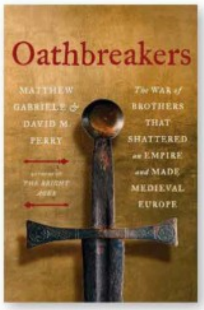
David Musgrove: Let's begin with the battle of Fontenoy in 841. What happened there and why was it so important?

Matthew Gabriele: Fontenoy is nowadays just a small village lying a little south-west of the city of Auxerre in central France. Even in the 840s, it wasn't particularly significant. But it was there that a civil war erupted between the grandsons of Charlemagne, who were fighting about the fate of the Carolingian empire.

After the death of their father, Louis the Pious, on 20 June 840, the three surviving brothers gathered at Fontenoy. Lothar, the eldest and the Frankish co-emperor, was trying to stitch the partitioned empire back together in the wake of his father's death; his younger brothers, Louis the German and Charles the Bald, had their own claims. Lothar was joined by his nephew, Pepin II of Aquitaine, the son of another brother, also called Pepin, who had died in 838.

The three brothers and their nephew basically argued about the form that the empire should take. Should it be coherent and unified under Lothar, or would Charles and Louis be able to function as independent kings in their own domains?

This dispute boiled over into a massive, bloody battle fought on 25 June 841. For most medieval battles, we have just a sense of where and when they were fought. For this clash, though, we have very specific details of the day and the time when the battle started, as well as the location. And that's because – as we argue at the start of our new book – it was so horrifying for everybody involved. It shook the empire and its participants to their core, creating reverberations that lasted for generations.



Oathbreakers: The War of Brothers that Shattered an Empire and Made Medieval Europe
by Matthew Gabriele and David M Perry
(Harper, 304 pages, £25)

What's the backstory to the dispute?

MG: The Franks rose to power in the fifth and sixth centuries when, after interacting with the Romans for a long time, they were finally able to establish their own realm. The resulting empire was ruled for several centuries by a dynasty called the Merovingians. They were supplanted in 751 in a coup d'état by high nobles who started a new dynasty that, over time, came to be named for one of their progenitors, Charles Martel – Charles being *Carolus* in Latin, hence the dynastic name 'Carolingian'.

The apogee of that empire came under Charlemagne, who ruled for a substantial length of time, taking power in 768 and dying in 814. He expanded the Frankish empire to encompass most of western and central Europe, from Denmark in the north down to central Italy, across the Pyrenees into Catalonia and east into Saxony. But what's really interesting to us is how quickly it fell apart – within just two generations. This myth of unity that the Franks constructed for themselves – this great empire that Charlemagne had created – was built, as we say in the book, on a foundation of lies.

They weren't just lies that the Franks told to other people, but lies they told themselves about their place in the world and the way that their empire was organised. What we find so interesting is not just the things that happened but also the stories these people told themselves about those events.

How did tensions escalate after Charlemagne's death?

David M Perry: Charlemagne had a lot of sons, and Louis was the only legitimate one who happened to survive. He had to work hard to build loyalty across his dad's empire – it was not just handed to him. Some of that was done through persuasion and through gifts, but some of it was achieved through violence and torture – in particular, the blinding of his nephew, Bernard of Italy, who then died. That caused great upset and upheaval in the court.

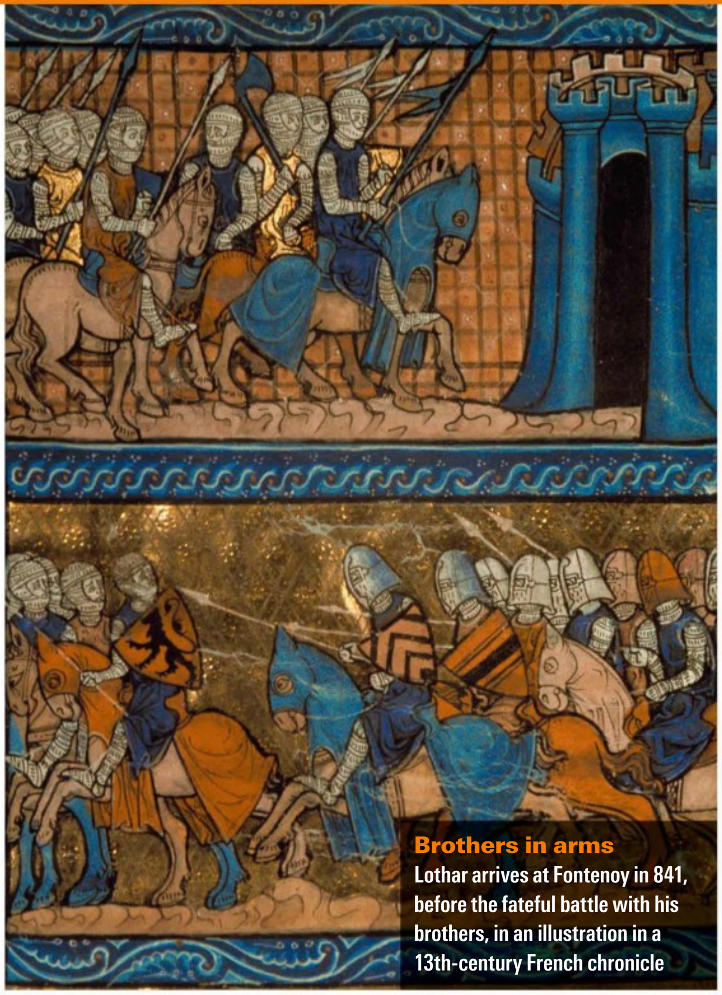
Louis tried to kick out the old guard and bring in the new. However, it turned out that the nobles comprising the old guard were still very powerful – and not super-thrilled about being kicked out. So there were these tensions right from the start. Then Louis remarried, taking as his wife a younger woman. The old guard weren't thrilled with that, either, because she brought in her own power centres.

So Louis' was not a stable reign, suffering from various internal problems, but it was also a moment at which the Franks started losing battles on the edges of the empire. And that was a whole other crisis of legitimacy.

MG: The stability and greatness of Charlemagne is often contrasted with the instability and fecklessness of Louis the Pious. But if you look at Charlemagne, he actually had a lot of problems governing, too.

We talk about the coups of the 830s against Louis the Pious, but Charlemagne himself faced several attempted coups. One such attempt in 792 was led by his own eldest son, Pepin, known to later historians as Pepin the Hunchback, though he certainly wasn't called that at the time.

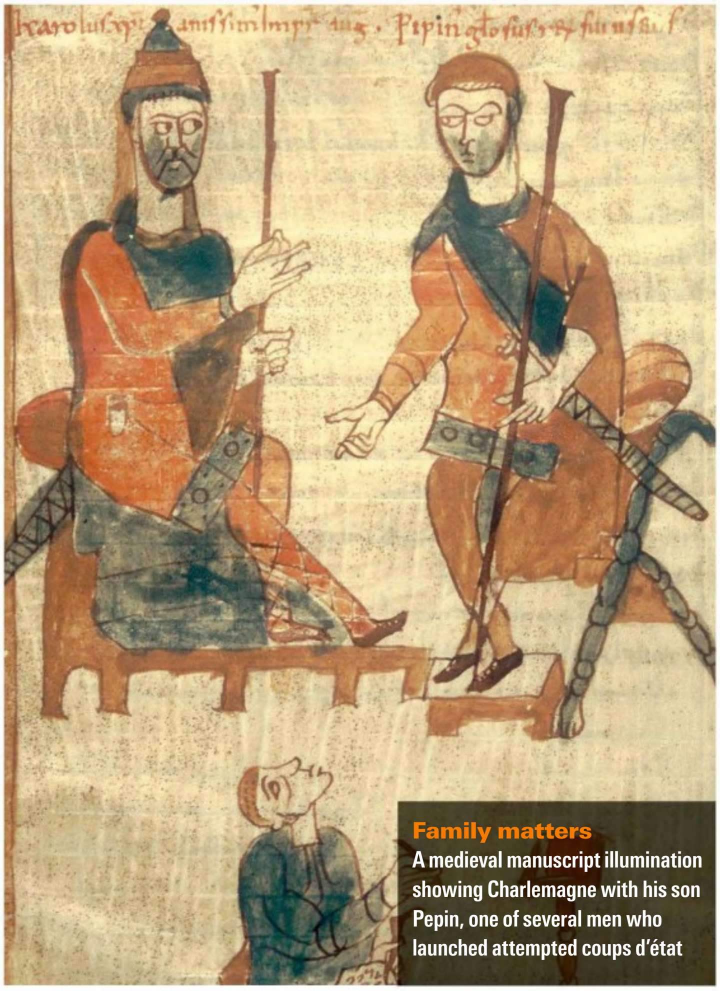
It seems baked into the way the Carolingians ruled their empires that they had to rely upon powerful nobles around them. So when these nobles got angry about their loss of status, that was a real problem for the kings. And just because only a few coups were successful, that doesn't mean that there weren't other coups plotted and executed along the way.



Brothers in arms
Lothar arrives at Fontenoy in 841, before the fateful battle with his brothers, in an illustration in a 13th-century French chronicle

PROFILE

Matthew Gabriele (above) is a professor of medieval studies at Virginia Tech and **David M Perry (top right)** is a journalist and historian. They previously co-authored *The Bright Ages: A New History of Medieval Europe* (HarperCollins, 2022)



Family matters
A medieval manuscript illumination showing Charlemagne with his son Pepin, one of several men who launched attempted coups d'état

HARPER COLLINS/AKG

> **“The nostalgia for Charlemagne’s empire animated the vast majority of continental European history through to the 15th or 16th century”**

What were Charlemagne’s grandsons trying to achieve at Fontenoy?

MG: They were trying to decide the fate of the empire. Lothar was trying to beat his brothers into submission, and ideally to restore the empire as it had been under his father and his grandfather.

Charles and Louis wanted something different: they wanted their own functional kingdoms within the empire. They wanted to be free from the meddling of the emperor in their lands – Charles the Bald’s realm lying to the west, Louis the German’s to the east – and the right to act as independent Carolingians. They had, they argued, the same blood as Lothar’s flowing through their veins.

Looking back, this event became – especially for 19th-century historians – the moment that made France and Germany. It was seen as the final division of Charlemagne’s empire, and the birthplace of the modern state. But today it seems clear that the debate was much more nuanced. Nobody was arguing that Lothar shouldn’t be emperor, they were just arguing about what his role should be there. And it was an argument that was so important that they were willing to kill each other: brothers fought against brothers, and cousins, uncles and nephews were divided between the armies.

These armies were camped across a field from each other, almost literally staring at each other. From all available sources, it seems that they exchanged emissaries, and decided that they would fight at 8 o’clock the following morning – Saturday 25 June 841. So they drew up their divisions, and out they headed.

How did the battle play out?

DP: Lothar had a well-equipped army and probably slightly larger numbers of men, supported by Pepin’s forces. Charles the Bald had a quite large army, drawn from all over the Frankish heartland. Louis had a smaller army, but it was battle-hardened.

Pepin and Charles met in the middle, Louis and Lothar met on the left, and there was a third division led by major nobles on the right. We know little about what actually happened in the battle, but it’s clear that Lothar’s forces engaged Louis and were beaten back, and then Pepin’s forces in the centre collapsed.

After that, there was a pursuit that resulted in horrific killing, but Lothar got away. He headed north-east to Aachen with the imperial treasury – and, once there, he spent wildly. He launched a rumour campaign saying that one of his brothers was wounded and the other was dead, neither of which was true, and he immediately started rebuilding political support.

This went on for some time. Eventually, Louis and Charles once again brought their armies together – and now they had clear military superiority, there was no dividing them again. So they brought Lothar to the negotiating table.

That brings us to the Treaty of Verdun in 843. What happened then?

DP: I remember very clearly learning about the Treaty of Verdun while I was an undergraduate in my first medieval history class – and being taught a number of things that are not correct. I believed that there was a treaty – a document, like the Treaty of Versailles – that was written in Latin, German and French, and that it showed the division of France and Germany. I don’t want to call out my undergraduate medieval history professor, because he’s the reason I’m talking to you today – he was a wonderful professor – but I remember learning these things, and they’re just not true.

We have no document. There is absolutely nothing surviving from that meeting in 843 that lays out the division of the empire explicitly. The year before the treaty, Louis and Charles travelled to the city of Strasbourg and undertook a public oath-taking. That was the moment when they came together and really made it clear they were going to sit down and talk until they reached an agreement – and where they confirmed their opposition to Lothar ruling the entire empire.

As a result, Louis and Charles brought Lothar to the negotiating table, where they agreed that they would split up the empire into three parts. Then they had the problem that no one knew exactly how big the empire was, so they sent out nobles to do the accounting. Nine months later they met in Verdun, really just because it’s a convenient place where those nobles could come together. We can figure out exactly how the empire was divided up only by looking at what happened over the next couple of years – where the brothers went, and which allies got which bits of land.

How did this civil war make medieval Europe?

MG: The nostalgia for Charlemagne’s empire animated the vast majority of continental European history through to the 15th or 16th century. The kings of France as they emerged, the emperors in what is now Germany, the rulers of Italy, even the Christian Iberian rulers, all tried to tie themselves in some ways – and in many ways it was accurate – back to the Carolingians through some bloodline that emerged there.

In the 830s and 840s, there were just too many Carolingians. Whereas there had only been one Charlemagne, and then only one Louis the Pious, after that, there were too many legitimate children of Louis, and then their children, and then their children, all of whom had potential to rule. And that tension, I think, was ultimately part of the problem that led to the civil war. But then, in the centuries thereafter, there was a dream of empire – and especially the dream of a sense of election, of being God’s chosen people – that never disappeared.

This view guides many of the actions that these men’s descendants took, including the push for the kingdom of France to expand beyond the Île de France and to reunite with the Carolingian bloodline. The desire to go on crusade in 1095, for example, was driven by the idea that these guys were all Franks and that they were fighting to reclaim Charlemagne’s claims to Jerusalem, which was another legend that evolved in the 10th and 11th centuries.

These medieval realms were different from what we think of as modern nation states such as France and Germany – they were different things aiming for different ends. Those modern states have sought justification for their formation in these events of the European Middle Ages, but the reality is different.

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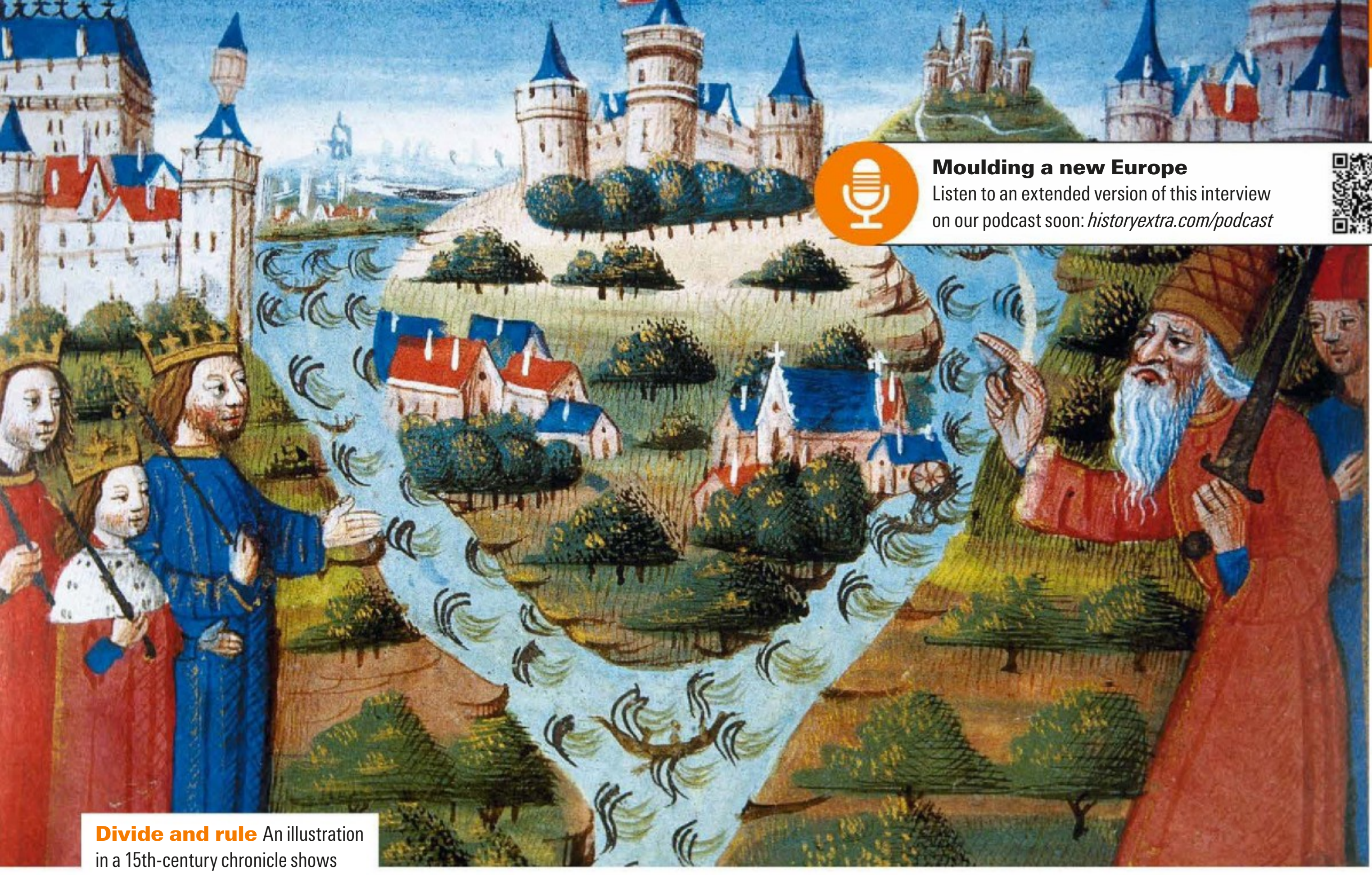
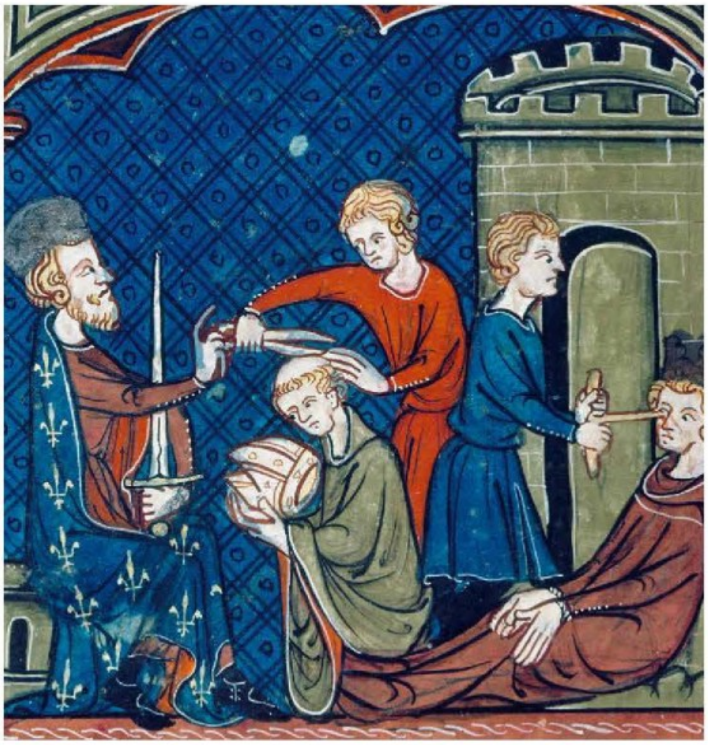
Dynastic legacy A metal cross made during the Merovingian or Carolingian dynasty in the eighth or ninth century. Later nations looked for legitimacy through links to that earlier empire



Moulding a new Europe
Listen to an extended version of this interview on our podcast soon: *historyextra.com/podcast*

Divide and rule An illustration in a 15th-century chronicle shows brothers Lothar, Louis and Charles at Verdun, agreeing to divide the Carolingian empire between them



Unstable emperor
Louis the Pious (left) oversees the blinding of his nephew Bernard, King of Italy, who had plotted against him – just one of many attempts to unseat this unstable ruler

AKG/BRIDGEMAN

DP: I just want to jump back into the oaths of Strasbourg, this famous moment on 14 February 842 for which we have a source written in Latin, but also French and German versions, because the men involved spoke all of these languages. Importantly, this was the first documented use of the French and German vernaculars.

It's not that there was a French troop and a German troop, and a linguistic divide between different peoples. The whole point is that there were a lot of languages spoken across this huge land mass, and the men involved wanted to make sure that everyone understood everything.

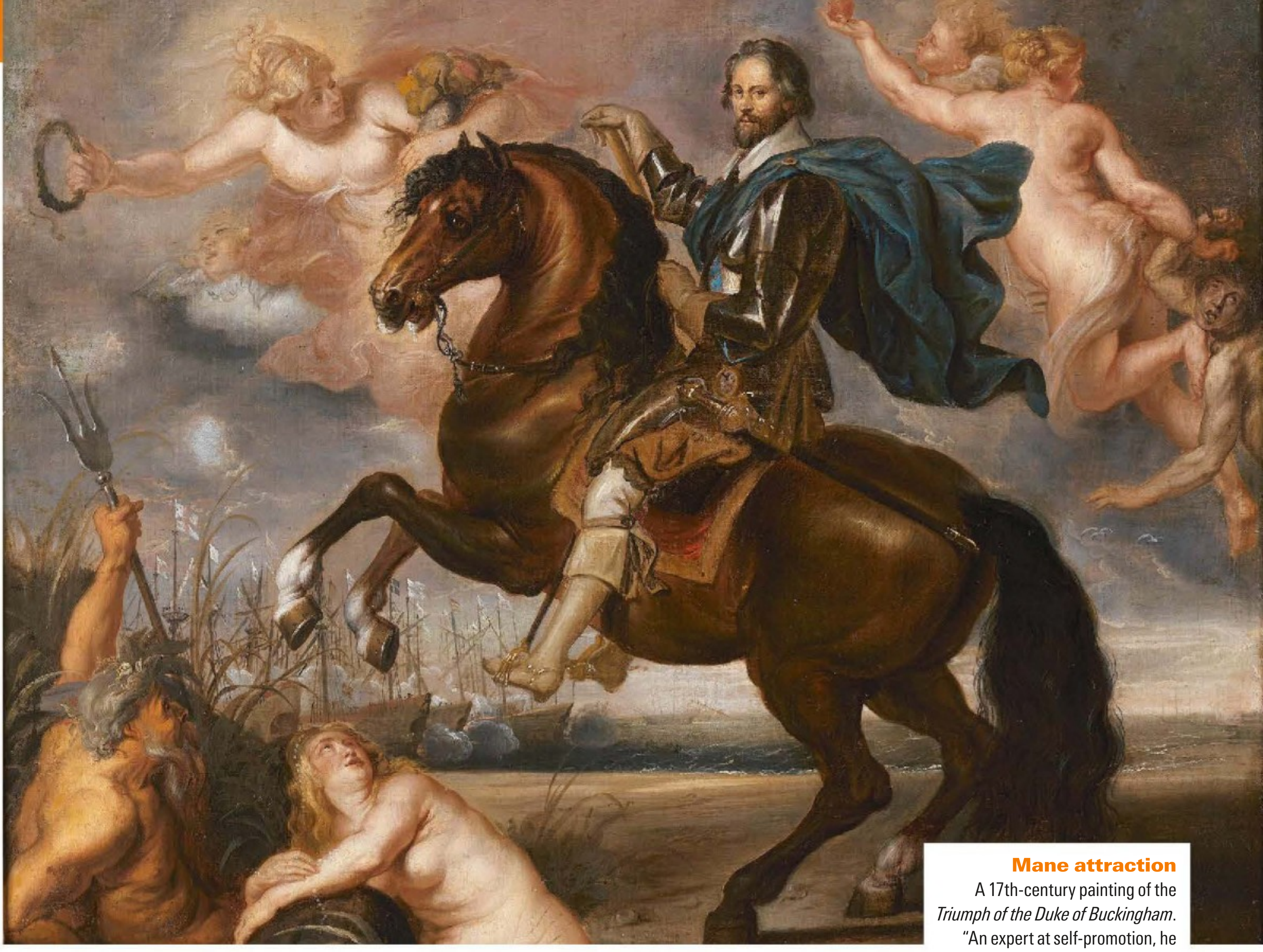
In the Carolingian empire, people were able to speak all of these languages – that was just normal. It was a big, complicated empire, and people talked to each other. It was only 1,000 years later that this point became symbolic – a way of creating a narrative that linked the new French and German nation states and nationalistic identities back to that moment when the oaths were sworn.

Looking at how people in the 19th century viewed events in the Middle Ages is something that Matt and I do a lot. We can definitely say that what they read into the situation was not what was actually happening in the ninth century.

Did that mid-ninth-century civil war conclusively fracture the Carolingian empire?

MG: The short answer is: yes. The empire was never stitched back together, though there were attempts to do so, especially in the later ninth century and the 10th century.

In the first and second generations after the battle of Fontenoy, these attempts failed because of the bad blood that was generated there. That wasn't just because of the bloodiness of the battle itself, or the resentments on either side about who deserved what, but the way that the battle was pursued – the fact that Louis' and Charles's armies followed Lothar's and cut down his men in their pursuit. It seems to have been a real massacre that people remembered for generations. ■

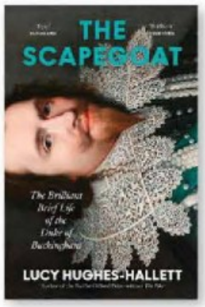


Mane attraction
A 17th-century painting of the *Triumph of the Duke of Buckingham*. "An expert at self-promotion, he converted the influence of a favourite into the power of a chief minister," says Joseph Ellis

STUARTS

Unravelling the enigma

JOSEPH ELLIS is impressed by a detailed, colourful and insightful biography of George Villiers, a Stuart royal favourite who made powerful enemies



The Scapegoat: The Brilliant Brief Life of the Duke of Buckingham
by Lucy Hughes-Hallett
Fourth Estate, 640 pages, £30

In just over a decade, George Villiers, later the Duke of Buckingham, was transformed from a court nobody into the most powerful courtier in the realm. His looks and charisma were famously unmatched. He was the incontestable favourite of not one king but two. He wielded an unprecedented level of political influence.

Recently, Buckingham (1592–1628) found stardom once again when the Sky Atlantic television series *Mary & George* thrust him back into public consciousness. The upcoming 400th anniversary of the death of James VI & I, and the accession of Charles I, will no doubt spark further interest in their shared favourite.

But where did "the handsomest-bodied man in all of England" come from? And who was the man behind the "face of an angel"? *Scapegoat* reveals the complex and flawed character lurking beyond the superstar image.

Lucy Hughes-Hallett dedicates more than 600 pages to a career that was meteoric, bright and brief. Such a sizeable tome promises to offer remarkable insights into one of history's most fascinating characters – and it delivers. Buckingham leaps off the page. An expert at self-promotion, he converted the influence of a favourite into the power of a chief minister. His modesty and charm enabled him to stay one step ahead of his opponents. He worked like a dog on behalf of his royal masters; being a favourite was not just a privilege, it was a full-time occupation.

Buckingham was far from perfect, and Hughes-Hallett doesn't suggest otherwise. He was prone to corruption and eager to profit from the misfortune of others. He was "mulishly stubborn" in his approach to European warfare. His madcap adventures

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> **He worked like a dog on behalf of his royal masters. Being a favourite was a full-time occupation**

in Spain with then-prince Charles – both disguised with false beards – hardly made for wise foreign policy. Yet, at the same time as waging war, he was delighting in art, antiquities and intricate curiosities. Brazen and refined in equal measure, he was a man of contradictions indeed.

The breathtaking rise of royal favourites tended to be followed by an equally spectacular fall. Untold wealth and power attracted jealousy and resentment. If not of noble birth, it was near-impossible for a favourite to shed the label of 'upstart'; such a person often died isolated and in disgrace – and the unluckiest perished by the sword.

Buckingham's career followed this well-trodden path. Hughes-Hallett untangles the highs and lows to provide, as she promises, "a collage that conjures up a life in all its complexity". Ultimately, Buckingham emerges from *Scapegoat* as a multi-faceted character sacrificed in the brutal cut and thrust of Stuart politics.

Complicated trinity

This book is not about Buckingham alone, however. Two of the three principal players in the story are kings: James VI & I, and Charles I, father and son. James referred to Buckingham as his "lover" but also his "sweet Child and Wife". Buckingham and Charles were best friends and inseparable allies. It was a complicated trinity.

Charles I grows throughout the book, evolving from an anxious, quivering prince into a self-assured king – perhaps too self-assured: his inflexibility is frustratingly obvious. Readers would be hard-pressed to find a more absorbing introduction to the period that culminated in civil war and the execution of a king.

Compared with its glittering Elizabethan predecessor, the Stuart court is often assumed to have been rather dour. *Scapegoat* injects colour back into that faded world. Introducing a prismatic cast of courtiers, ministers and hangers-on, Hughes-Hallett weaves a vivid tapestry of palace life. In this story, women were just as significant and scheming as their husbands, and witches, wizards, thieves and murderers are among the characters encountered.

Hughes-Hallett deftly navigates the delicate and fast-shifting network of allegiances that constituted the theatre of Stuart politics. Personal affronts could easily become political catastrophes – and, indeed, Buckingham was far from the only whipping boy. He made scapegoats of his enemies – and sometimes of his friends. Francis Bacon was just one of many who helped Buckingham to the top, only to find himself crushed underfoot.

Those further down the social scale also suffered as a result of Buckingham's misguided attempts to maintain his dignity on the European stage. Thousands of men faced the horrendous reality of early modern warfare; countless died, often in vain. All of this reached the ears of ordinary citizens with lightning speed, thanks to an army of scandalmongers who sold their salacious tracts on the green of St Paul's Cathedral.

Hughes-Hallett's thematic approach to Buckingham's life makes *Scapegoat* less a traditional biography, more a fast-paced journey through early Stuart society. Buckingham's tale is one of extravagance and intrigue, power and scandal, of family, love, sex and belief.

It is not merely the story of early Stuart Britain, but of early modern Europe. The journey to Spain taken by Charles and Buckingham had ramifications far beyond its absurdity. The uninvited presence of a Protestant prince in Catholic Madrid stirred up issues at the very heart of Reformation politics. In *Scapegoat*, the episode receives the critical attention it deserves.

Hughes-Hallett's prose is always evocative, often humorous, and builds an atmosphere of tension that is rare in non-fiction. Her attention to detail is remarkable, and her short, punchy chapters move smoothly between high politics, popular culture and domestic drama.

Interruptions to the chronological narrative are occasionally jarring, but not often. On the whole, the reader leaves each chapter with another piece of the historical puzzle in place. Most significantly, *Scapegoat* unravels the enigma, transforming Buckingham from a "prancing popinjay" into a man of substance.

Joseph Ellis is a historical researcher at the University of York, specialising in the royal progresses of James VI & I

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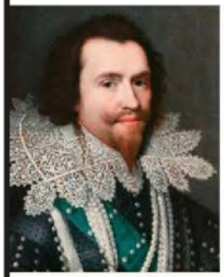
ON THE PODCAST

Buckingham's world

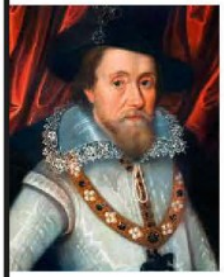
Content producer **Danny Bird** picks three episodes of the *HistoryExtra* podcast related to George Villiers' life and times

Jacobean drama



Released last year, Sky Atlantic's historical drama *Mary & George* told the story of the ambitious mother-and-son duo who transformed the early Stuart court in England. Benjamin Woolley, an expert on the Villiers family, joined us to discuss their impact and to address rumours about George's role in the death of James VI & I. *historyextra.com/mary-george-pod*

Regal relationships



James VI & I (left) shared an intimate bond with George Villiers, who was his favourite at court as well as his reputed lover. Theirs was an intense and complicated relationship that profoundly influenced the Stuart monarchy. In this 2024 episode from our *Life of the Week* series, historian Joseph Ellis unpacks James's dramatic life and pivotal reign. *historyextra.com/king-james-pod*

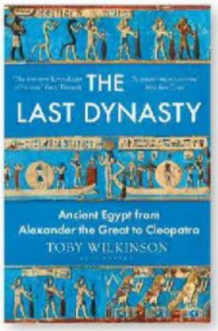
Dynastic shift

Elizabeth I's death in 1603 signalled the demise of Tudor England and the dawn of Stuart rule. This change, which saw Buckingham's rise, also sparked decades of upheaval: the gunpowder plot, civil war, regicide and lasting constitutional reform. Historian Anna Keay introduces the Stuarts in an episode of our *Everything You Wanted to Know* series. *historyextra.com/stuarts-everything-pod*

ANCIENT EGYPT

Greek drama

LLOYD LLEWELLYN-JONES is swept along by an engaging exploration of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt in the final centuries before Rome conquered this ancient land



The Last Dynasty: Ancient Egypt from Alexander the Great to Cleopatra
by Toby Wilkinson
Bloomsbury, 384 pages, £25

The Ptolemaic dynasty, the last royal house to rule Egypt before its submission into the Roman empire, is not well known outside scholarly circles. Even among academics the Ptolemies are viewed with trepidation. Classicists do not know what to do with them, while Egyptologists prefer to ignore them. Suddenly, though, three popular books on the Ptolemaic dynasty have appeared.

There's my own book, which looks at all the Cleopatras other histories prefer to leave out. Second, the narrative of Romanist-cum-Egyptologist Guy de la Bédoyère's *The Fall of Egypt and the Rise of Rome* keeps Rome's ultimate triumph in view. Lastly – and wonderfully – there is this book by Toby Wilkinson, one of our leading and most popular Egyptologists.

Wilkinson does a fine job – as anyone who wants to take the Ptolemaic world seriously must learn – of keeping his feet in two separate camps: one in the brave new Greek-speaking Hellenistic world out of which the Macedonian Ptolemies emerged, the other in the old world of pharaonic Egypt, which the Macedonian invaders found themselves ruling. The historian who tackles this strange amalgam of Greek and Egyptian languages, traditions, theologies and outlooks needs to be confident with a sometimes bewildering set of disparate primary sources. Wilkinson juggles them with aplomb, and is as confident in his interpretation of the Greek materials as he is with the Egyptian evidence.

The result is a bold exploration of the Greek colonisation of Egypt, with its many glories. These include the city of Alexandria, the great temples of Edfu, Esna, Kom Ombo, Dendera and elsewhere, and feats of intellect in poetry, medicine and philosophy all sponsored by the crown. There are, however, also many, many failures: a deep-set anti-Egyptian xenophobia, economic blundering, poor military strategy, and the governance of some truly dismal kings.

Combining cultures A bas-relief at the ancient Egyptian Temple of Kom Ombo, constructed during the Ptolemaic dynasty – whose rulers blended local beliefs with Greek traditions from their forebears' homeland

AKG IMAGES

> **"Alexander the Great declared himself the high priest of all gods, a living god, and the beloved son of Zeus-Amun"**

I especially like Wilkinson's deft interpretation of the Egyptian context of the Ptolemaic world. This, I think, is the strongest element of the work, and in taking this approach Wilkinson has made a valuable contribution to Hellenistic scholarship generally.

The Ptolemies inherited Egypt from Alexander the Great, and ruled as they believed he would have done. So it was fascinating to read that, on his only sojourn there, Alexander imbued the very essence of pharaonic divine authority. Standing in the inner sanctum of Luxor Temple, Wilkinson explains, Alexander drank in the ancient wall reliefs that showed the mystical presence of the god Amun and the leopard-skin-wearing high priest who performed the rites of the deity. It was in Luxor Temple that Alexander saw the 'divine birth' scenes of the pharaoh Amenhotep III, Egypt's sun king, in which the monarch proclaimed himself the living image of Amun, his father. These powerful images resonated deep with the conqueror; by the time he died almost a decade later, he had declared himself the high priest of all gods, a living god, and the beloved son of Zeus-Amun. Egypt had conquered Alexander and left its mark on all those Ptolemies and Cleopatras who followed.

In this splendid, well-written and thoroughly engaging book, Wilkinson provides us with the key we need to interpret the pharaonic world through the eyes of the Ptolemaic kings and queens – who must themselves have taken their lead from the priests who steered them through the maze of Egypt's past and the labyrinth of pharaonic culture.

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones is professor of ancient history at Cardiff University. His latest book is *The Cleopatras: The Forgotten Queens of Egypt* (Wildfire, 2024)

ESPIONAGE

Hidden figures

An eloquent exploration of the work of female British intelligence agents impresses **KATE VIGURS**

Her Secret Service
The Forgotten Women of British Intelligence
Claire Hubbard-Hall

Her Secret Service: The Forgotten Women of British Intelligence
by Claire Hubbard-Hall
Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 352 pages, £25

"Our secretaries need only two things: good legs and a good upbringing," said MI6 chief Dick White in 1956. Claire Hubbard-Hall's well-researched and eloquently written book gives the lie to this misogynist fallacy, telling the oft untold stories of women who formed the backbone of MI5, MI6 and other secretive organisations during both world wars – tales of conspiracy, spying and political intrigue.

The author takes readers on a journey into the innermost workings of Britain's intelligence agencies. She replaces the often repetitive 'bang-bang-bang' of spies' guns with the 'clackety-clack-clack' of their typewriters – and, in doing so, highlights the importance of women's roles in administrative offices as well as their operational work.

Some female spies are familiar, such as the infamous Mata Hari, but Hubbard-Hall brings other women into the spotlight. One such was Winifred Spink, a formidable figure who passionately supported women's suffrage and was a friend of the Pankhursts. In 1916, she took a post in pre-revolutionary Russia, knowing that she was "destined to witness world-shaking events", and understanding that the assassination of Rasputin "seemed to be the overt act that triggered the long threatened Russian Revolution".

A central thread running throughout the book is Kathleen Pettigrew, who was the inspiration for the main MI6 secretary in Ian Fleming's James Bond novels. "I was Miss Moneypenny," she recalled, "but with more power." Tales from Pettigrew's career punctuate the text, and the frequent references to James Bond – even in the cleverly worded chapter headings – remind the reader of the world into which they are delving, where fact is often stranger than fiction.

We learn, for example, how D-Day was nearly ruined as a result of a double agent's love for her dog, which proved so strong that, when the animal was not brought to join her, she threatened to leak Allied secrets to which she was privy in an act of revenge.

Sections on the Special Operations Executive (SOE) also provide a novel take on women in the organisation. Instead of repeating well-worn stories, Hubbard-Hall shares refreshing anecdotes from staff who met SOE agents Violette Szabo and Cicely Lefort. Insights into SOE office and administrative staff include tales from the 'Camouflage section', revealing details about the work of the women who made the clothes and accessories that could make the difference between life and death for a secret agent.

This remarkable book makes clear the imbalances within the wartime workplace – in terms of not only pay but also status: women's achievements were often not recognised by promotion in rank. They were aware, though, of their unusual positions. "It was a unique experience," said one, "and I was very lucky to have it come my way."

Hubbard-Hall's cast "understood how to open doors rather than close them", and this book's overarching narrative is one of adventure and opportunity as well as injustice. These women banged hard and persistently on the glass ceiling until it shattered, showering them with chances and experiences in the secretive world of intelligence and espionage that women had never before encountered.

Kate Vigurs is a historian and author. Her new book, *Mission Europe* (Yale), is out in May 2025

Power player Kathleen Pettigrew, the senior MI6 secretary who inspired Ian Fleming's Miss Moneypenny

DR CLAIRE HUBBARD-HALL

THE CLASSIC BOOK

Charlotte Lydia Riley on a **powerful family story exploring social politics**

LANDSCAPE FOR A GOOD WOMAN
CAROLYN STEEDMAN

Landscape for a Good Woman
by Carolyn Steedman
(Virago, 1986)

It was my mother who first introduced me to this book. She was moved by the moment at which Carolyn Steedman discovers that her birth certificate erroneously records her parents as married. As a family with its share of historical illegitimacy and wrangling with respectability politics, the experience rang true to us both.

When I became a historian, Steedman's careful narration of the way that archives can elide the truth – not just through gaps and silences, but through the lies of human lives – rang in my ears as I sat down in the National Archives.

Steedman's text was trailblazing in the way that it wove together family history and History (capital H) into a compelling narrative of archival and personal discovery. This could have taken the form of juxtaposing the amateur with the academic as a sort of light relief or emotional contrast. Instead, Steedman takes family histories seriously, as she takes memory seriously – certainly as seriously as those lying historical documents. Reading this book gives you – me – an understanding of the possibilities not only of historical scholarship but of writing itself.

At one point, Steedman illustrates the class distinctions in the literary world of 1986, when she published the book. Talking to a fellow writer at a party, she thinks: "a hundred years ago I'd have been cleaning your shoes. I know this and you don't." I have this printed out and pasted on my office wall. It felt like the first true thing I read in a history book.

Charlotte Lydia Riley is associate professor of history at the University of Southampton

18+

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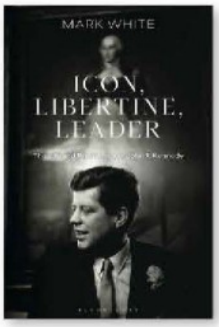
POLITICAL

A modern icon

IWAN MORGAN lauds an insightful and clear-eyed examination of a leader blessed with charisma and quality but also marred by personal flaws



Icon, Libertine, Leader: The Life and Presidency of John F Kennedy
by Mark White
Bloomsbury, 288 pages, £65

For anyone questioning whether we need another book on one of the most written-about US presidents, Mark White's study provides a resoundingly affirmative response. Its portrayal of JFK's youthful, optimistic and energetic leadership offers a timely contrast to the White House gerontocracy of recent years.

In popular American memory, Kennedy's assassination created the aura of a fallen hero who might otherwise have guided the nation through the turbulent 1960s without it having to endure the shattering effects of the Vietnam War, racial conflict and political violence. As White demonstrates, however, his thousand-day tenure was about more than promise, because it also featured substantive achievements at home and abroad. This important study can be viewed as a post-revisionist riposte both to the early hagiography of Kennedy administration insiders that characterised JFK as a Camelot-style leader, and the later hatchet-jobs that considered him unfit for office after details of his racy private life became public.

Despite an early stumble in supporting a futile effort to overthrow the Castro regime in Cuba in April 1961, Kennedy was at his best in crisis management. He was cool, shrewd and flexible in avoiding confrontation with the Soviet Union, while achieving his objectives over Berlin in 1961 and over the Soviet emplacement of nuclear missiles in Cuba in late 1962. Kennedy added moral strength to these qualities when faced with domestic crisis, finally committing his presidency to enacting strong civil rights legislation in response to police violence towards black Americans peacefully protesting against segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963.

Any evaluation of Kennedy has to consider the character flaws manifest in his numerous extramarital affairs – an aspect that White does not shy away from addressing. His detailing of JFK's flings and deeper liaisons, some of them patently reckless, makes one wonder how Kennedy found time for affairs of state. For White, however, Kennedy was successful in keeping his private life and public role separate, so the one did not affect the other. The president's sexual escapades probably reflected a heightened sense of mortality arising from a string of serious illnesses that afflicted him from childhood into middle age. He was lucky that the easy-going 1960s press, which knew what he was up to, chose not to report it – an indulgence not extended to that later presidential philanderer, Bill Clinton.

> **"JFK's sexual escapades probably reflected a keen sense of mortality arising from a string of serious illnesses"**

Serious historians are mostly reluctant to speculate on what might have happened had Kennedy lived to complete two terms, but White boldly steps in where his peers fear to tread – and does so to good effect. His persuasive analysis suggests that JFK would have avoided going to war in Vietnam because of his distrust of his military chiefs – a product of their belligerence in the Cuban missile crisis – and his growing orientation towards the peaceful settlement of international disputes in his final year of life.

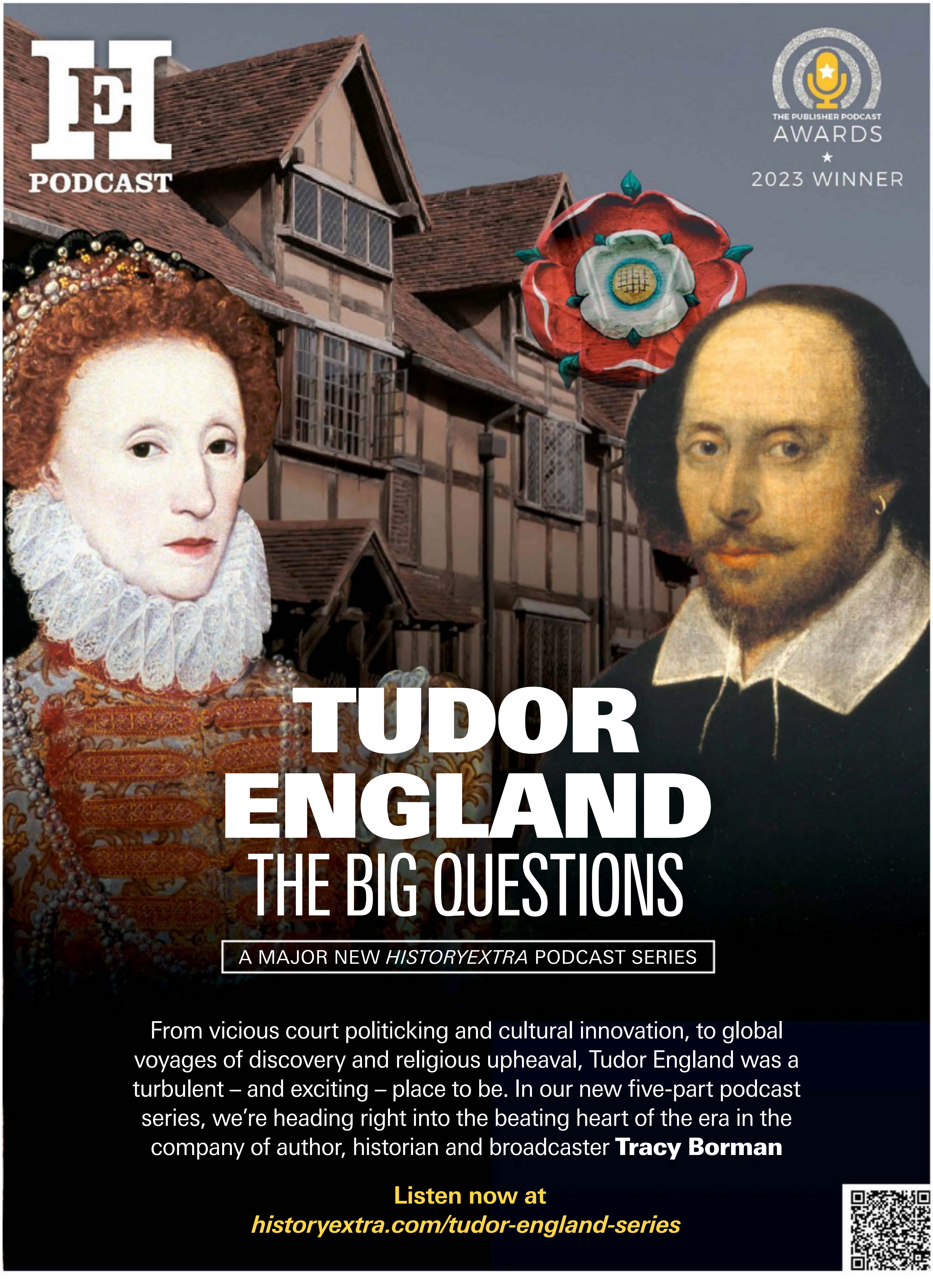
He also contends that Kennedy would have pursued a progressive domestic agenda in his second term, but a less expansive one than Lyndon B Johnson's Great Society, whose overreach did much to fracture the New Deal coalition of voters.

This tightly argued study stands out as the best single-volume analysis of Kennedy's life and presidency. It's a great read that will enlighten anyone interested in modern American history.

Iwan Morgan is emeritus professor of United States studies at University College London

Flawed hero John F Kennedy in Paris in 1961. A new biography of the widely venerated president expertly steers a course between hagiography and hatchet-job

GETTY IMAGES



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ENCOUNTERS

DIARY By **Jonathan Wright** and **Danny Bird**
HISTORY COOKBOOK **Medieval sambocade**
EXPLORE **Isles of Scilly**, Cornwall

NETFLIX

FILM

Against the odds

By early 1945, there was an estimated backlog of 17 million items of mail that had yet to reach American troops in the UK and continental Europe. It fell to the 6888th Central Postal Directory Battalion, the first and only Women's Army Corps unit of colour to serve overseas in the Second World War, to clear a logjam of undelivered letters and parcels so vast it was thought to be damaging morale. This they did while facing gruelling working conditions, racism and sexism.

It's a story dramatised in *The Six Triple Eight*, written and directed by Tyler Perry and starring Kerry Washington as the 6888th's trailblazing commanding officer, Major Charity Adams (1918–2002).

The Six Triple Eight
Netflix / Friday 20 December

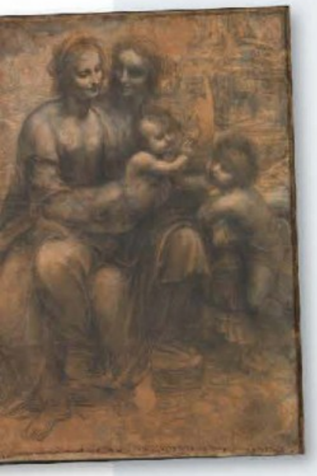
The Six Triple Eight tells the story of a unit of black women charged with clearing a logjam of undelivered letters in the Second World War

What's on this week?
Visit *historyextra.com* for updates on upcoming history TV and radio programmes

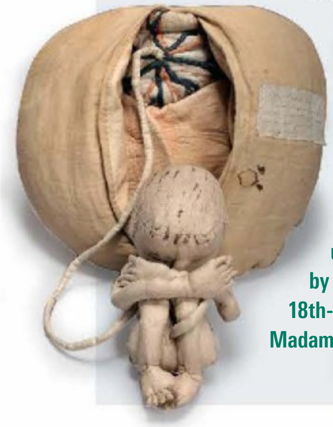
EXHIBITIONS

I See His Blood Upon the Rose
The MAC, Belfast / Until 30 March 2025 / *themaclive.com*
This exhibition examines the history of flowers in art, exploring their adoption as symbols of political influence and revolution across four centuries. From 17th-century still lifes to the Vietnam War, it showcases the works of contemporary and historical artists from Rachel Ruysch to Tracy Emin, exploring themes of love, grief and faith.

Michelangelo, Leonardo, Raphael: Florence, c1504
The Royal Academy, London / Until 16 February 2025 / *royalacademy.org.uk*
Explore the intense artistic rivalry between Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci, and their profound influence on Raphael, through more than 40 masterpieces. Highlights include Michelangelo's *Taddei Tondo*, Leonardo's *Burlington House Cartoon* (pictured) and Raphael's *Bridgewater Madonna*. Visitors will uncover stories of competition, collaboration and groundbreaking artistic ingenuity that transformed Florence into the epicentre of the Italian Renaissance.



Versailles: Science and Splendour
Science Museum, London / Until 21 April 2025 / *sciencemuseum.org.uk*
Experience the opulence of the French royal court at Versailles through cutting-edge science and innovation. You can marvel at the world's most famous watch, designed for Marie Antoinette, alongside exquisite instruments, artworks and technologies that revolutionised an era. Discover how science redefined 18th-century court life in an exhibition that explores a blend of ingenuity and majesty.



Part of a mannequin used as a teaching aid by the pioneering 18th-century midwife Madame du Coudray

Jack O'Connell returns as Paddy Mayne in the second series of *SAS Rogue Heroes*

TV

Up for the fight

In January 1943, David Stirling, the man who created the SAS, was captured. He spent the rest of the war trying to escape. Meanwhile, command of his men fell to Paddy Mayne, who initially led a regiment now dubbed the Special Raiding Squadron into action in Sicily and mainland Italy.

It's a story told in the second series of *SAS Rogue Heroes*, created by Steven Knight. As with the first time around, you can expect action, intrigue and insubordination. Returning stars include Jack O'Connell (Mayne), Connor Swindells (Stirling), Sofia Boutella (the fictional spy Eve Mansour) and Dominic West (military deception pioneer Dudley Clarke). Also keep an eye out for new recruit Mark Rowley, of *The Last Kingdom* fame, as Jock McDiarmid.

SAS Rogue Heroes
BBC One / January

Sister Monica Joan gets in the Christmas spirit as *Call the Midwife* reaches 1969

TV

Christmas in Poplar

It's a staple of the BBC Christmas schedules, but that doesn't make the return of *Call the Midwife* any less welcome. Often a grittier show than its reputation suggests, it has now dramatised more than a decade of British social change after 1957.

The latest Christmas specials – and this time there are two episodes rather than the customary feature-length offering – are set in 1969. Plot-lines will encompass a funfair, an escaped prisoner, a carol service, the *Blue Peter* Christmas appeal and the 'Hong Kong' flu pandemic that hit the UK over the winter of 1969–70. A new series of adventures for the Poplar crew follows in the New Year.

Call the Midwife
BBC One / Christmas Day

BBC/SCIENCE MUSEUM LONDON/THE ROYAL ACADEMY

Claes Bang (right) plays a marksman confronted with a grotesque challenge in a new film version of the William Tell story

FILM

Folk hero

It's 1307 and the huntsman William Tell (Claes Bang) faces the most grotesque of challenges: to shoot an apple off the head of his son (Tobias Jowett) with a crossbow. But how did Tell end up in this situation? It's a tale told in British director Nick Hamm's new historical epic, which is based on the 19th-century play by the German dramatist Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

The film offers a mix of epic action scenes and palace intrigue. As for the historical backdrop, it's the story of how, with the Holy Roman Empire in turmoil, the Habsburgs, keen to expand their lands, turned acquisitive eyes towards Switzerland.

William Tell

In cinemas from Friday 10 January

ALAMY/BBC/GETTY IMAGES

Lucy Worsley is back to challenge what we think we know about landmark episodes in Britain's past

TV

Cold case investigator

At least in part, it's the job of historians to challenge what we think we know about the past. Few do this with such aplomb as Lucy Worsley, which makes the return of her hit series revisiting major events and reappraising key characters from British history so welcome.

This time around, there are four new episodes, respectively dealing with the gunpowder plot (see our feature on page 40), Jack the Ripper, England post-1066, and Mary Tudor. The programme on the Norman conquest looks intriguing, dealing with an often unacknowledged national trauma and William the Conqueror's brutal suppression of rebellion, which culminated in the Harrying of the North in 1069–70.

Lucy Worsley Investigates

BBC Two / Friday 3 January

RADIO HIGHLIGHTS

Testament of youth

To quote the author Katherine Rundell, for children Christmas has "a surfeit of magic and limitless possibility". Along with Mark Gatiss and Lemn Sissay, Rundell is one of the writers speaking to Cerys Matthews for **Archive on 4: A Child's Christmas** (Saturday 21 December, BBC Radio 4), a documentary that charts how writers have captured the big day from a child's perspective.

Among other **Archive on 4** offerings, **The Dome** (Saturday 28 December) finds Paul Merton looking back at the construction of the Millennium Dome. It was a building meant to convey turn-of-the-century optimism, yet became associated with scepticism and the wasting of public money.

For **Archive on 4: Upon the Education of the People** (Saturday 4 January), the likes of Joan Bakewell (pictured) and Michael Rosen explore the after-effects of the 1944 Education Act, which created three kinds of state schools: technical, secondary modern and grammar. In **Archive on 4: Do You Speak English?** (Saturday 11 January), Miriam Margolyes is among those discussing the impact of BBC programming that has, down the years, helped to teach the world the English language.

Among other highlights on BBC Radio 4, **The Reunion: Absolutely Fabulous** (Christmas Day) will feature contributions from the show's creator, Jennifer Saunders, plus Joanna Lumley, Julia Sawalha, Jane Horrocks and producer Jon Plowman. **Christmas Pudding** (Sunday 22 December) is an adaptation of Nancy Mitford's comedy, charting the festive season as it plays out at the ancient country seat of the Bobbin family of Compton Bobbin.

On BBC Radio 3, highlights include **Sunday Feature: An Organ for the Sultan** (Sunday 29 December), in which Ben Cottam tells the story of Thomas Dallam, who was commissioned by Elizabeth I to build an instrument so impressive that the world's most powerful man, Ottoman sultan Mehmet III, reassessed his opinion of the English.

Witness History (BBC World Service) has a series of food-themed shows this Christmas week, kicking off with **Creating Masterchef** (Monday 23 December).

RECIPE

Medieval sambocade

ELEANOR BARNETT recreates an early cheesecake – a dish with surprisingly long roots stretching back well over two millennia

This 14th-century precursor to modern cheesecake is made with a shortcrust base and is flavoured with rosewater and dried elderflowers

Serves: 6–8
Difficulty: 6/10
Time taken: 3 hours

INGREDIENTS

For shortcrust pastry
185g plain flour
2 tsp caster sugar
Pinch of salt
115g cold unsalted butter
2–3 tbsp very cold water
For filling
480g cottage cheese
200g ricotta cheese
100g caster sugar
4 egg whites
2–3 tbsp dried elderflowers
½ tbsp rosewater

METHOD

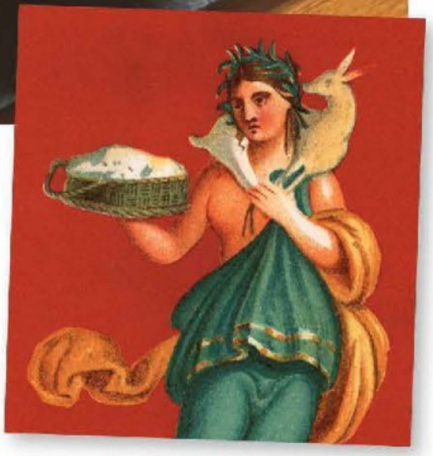
1. For pastry, mix flour, caster sugar and salt.
2. Rub butter into the mixture with your fingertips until it resembles crumbs.
3. Gradually add in cold water with a rubber spatula until mixture starts to clump.
4. Tip it out and make a dome shape. Wrap in cling film and refrigerate for minimum 1 hour.
5. Roll out the pastry to about 0.5cm thick and lay over a lined cake or tart dish. Trim, leaving 1cm overhanging; tuck this under.
6. Refrigerate again for 15 minutes while preheating oven to 200°C.
7. Blind bake the crust: prick the pastry with a fork, place baking paper on top and fill with baking beads or dry rice. Bake for 15 minutes.
8. For the filling, mix cottage and ricotta cheeses, sugar, elderflowers and rosewater.
9. Beat egg whites into stiff white peaks, then fold into the cheese mixture.
10. Remove beads/rice and baking paper from crust; pour in filling.
11. Bake for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until uniformly golden on top. Turn off oven and leave the pie in it to slowly cool for a further half-hour. Slice and serve.

You might assume that the rich and creamy cheesecake so popular in the UK hails from New York, but the ancient Greeks have a good claim to its invention. A source from Greece written in AD 230 describes mixing cheese, honey and wheat flour, and legend has it that such cheesecakes, considered to be great sources of energy, were served at the first Olympic Games reputedly held in 776 BC.

The ancient Romans adapted the recipe, serving the cheese filling in a pastry, creating a dish closer to what we might view as cheesecake today. In the second century BC, Cato the Elder recorded a recipe for the then-popular placenta cake, which gets its name from the Greek for 'flat'. Cato's placenta cake was made by alternating layers of cheese and honey with sheets of dough. (Interestingly, the human organ called the placenta is actually named after the cake, because of its supposed resemblance.)

Though the now-familiar name didn't come into use until the 15th century, perhaps the first true cheesecake recipe comes from the earliest English cookbook, *The Forme of Cury* ('cury' from the old French meaning 'cookery') compiled around 1390. The recipe for sambocade – a name derived from the Latin word for the elder tree – calls for cheese curds, sugar, egg whites and dried elderflowers, with a little rosewater for added flavour, to be mixed and baked in a pie crust. Cheesy in a way that modern cheesecakes often aren't, with the perfect amount of sweetness provided by the sugar and rosewater, that's the version I've adapted here.

Similar cheesecakes were made from cheese curds in the mid-17th century, with the addition of breadcrumbs or almonds to thicken, plus extra flavourings such as nutmeg, and a little cream. The cheesecake so widely enjoyed today is, however, a much later American invention made with cream cheese and a crushed graham cracker (or biscuit) base.



A reproduction of a wall painting in Pompeii depicts Spring carrying a basket of cheese

Cream cheese was invented in 1872 by New York dairy farmer William Lawrence, while trying to recreate the popular French soft cheese Neufchâtel. Lawrence took his creamy version and went into business with a cheese distributor, who named the new product Philadelphia Cream Cheese – a marketing ploy playing on that city's reputation for high-quality dairy products.

Graham crackers were also invented in the 19th century by American clergyman and health reformer Sylvester Graham, who advocated for a plain diet lacking the flavours and textures that he feared would inflame lust. Only in the 20th century did the unlikely pairing of cream cheese and graham crackers come together in the form of a New York cheesecake – a delicious indulgence that certainly would *not* have gained Graham's approval.

Eleanor Barnett is a food historian at Cardiff University and @Historyeats on Instagram. Her book *Leftovers: A History of Food Waste and Preservation* (Apollo) is out now

ALAMY/ELEANOR BARNETT

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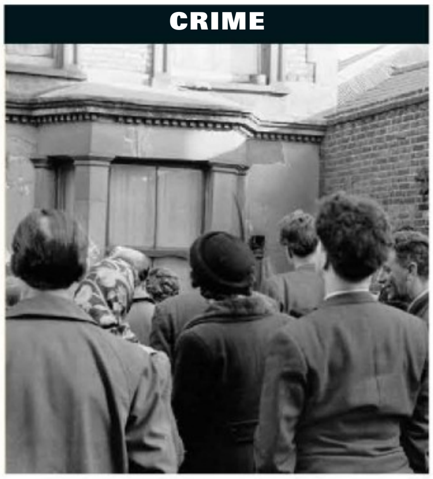
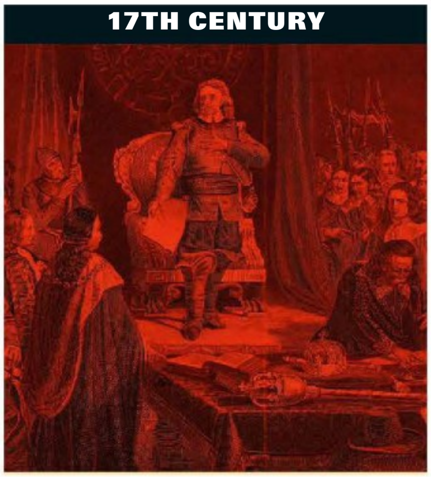


Murder sensation

On 24 March 1953, three bodies were found inside the walls of a flat in Notting Hill. **Kate Summerscale** reveals how the Rillington Place murders became a national obsession, and what the case tells us about life in postwar London.

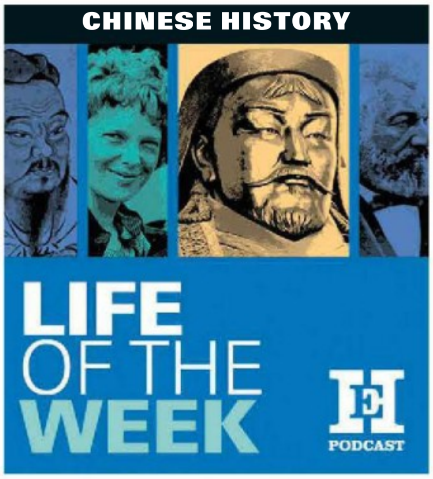
17TH CENTURY



After the regicide

It was an era of turbulence and transformation – so why is Britain's Republican decade not talked about more? **Alice Hunt** argues that it is one of the most significant eras in British history – and challenges some myths about Oliver Cromwell in the process.

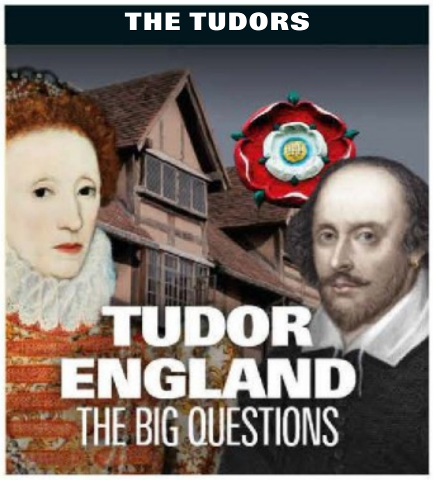
CHINESE HISTORY



Ruler of the waves

Genghis Khan may have built a formidable land empire, but his grandson Kublai Khan mastered the seas. **Jack Weatherford** reveals how a nomadic leader came to have such a formidable navy – and managed to conquer China in the process.

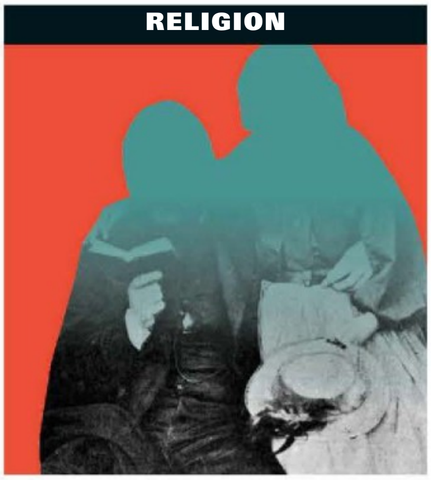
THE TUDORS



An age of change

Fickle monarchs, religious tensions and theatrical masterpieces: the Tudor age was a fascinating time in which to live. In our new series, *Tudor England: The Big Questions*, **Tracy Borman** takes us on a whistlestop tour through the era, touching on politics, culture and everyday life.

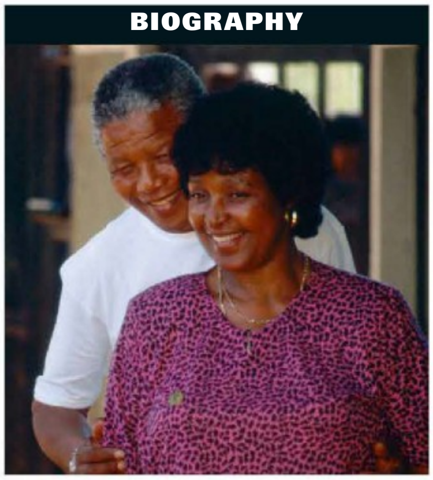
RELIGION



Cult figures

In the 1840s, a secretive community known as the Agapemonites set up camp in Somerset. Presided over by a rogue Anglican priest who believed he had a hotline to God, this religious cult attracted – and in many cases entrapped – its wealthy members. **Stuart Flinders** shares their story.

BIOGRAPHY



Winnie and Nelson

Nelson and Winnie Mandela's relationship was both personal and political – a powerful symbol of the freedom struggle in apartheid South Africa. But, as **Jonny Steinberg** reveals, the Mandelas' marriage was also dogged by infidelity, violence and the weight of the regime they fought against.

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY/DREAMSTIME

Shipwrecks on Scilly

Beneath the clear waters of the Isles of Scilly lurk treacherous rocks on which more than 1,000 ships have foundered. **CLARE HARGREAVES** discovers their stories

Fringed by turquoise seas and silver-sand beaches, to visitors the Scilly archipelago looks like a Caribbean paradise. As the south-westernmost outposts of England, they've always been important strategically and as a staging post for military and merchant ships. But look out to sea and you'll clock Scilly's dark underside – treacherous rocks with savage names like Hell Bay, Crebinicks and Hellweathers, which have wrecked more than 1,000 vessels.

Until the late 18th century, the carnage on Scilly's rocks was compounded by our inability to calculate longitude, plus inaccurate navigational charts and instruments. The only lighthouse – on St Agnes, Scilly's most south-westerly inhabited island – was on land, so effectively lured ships onto its surrounding rocks. In bad weather its light, mainly coal-fired, was invisible beyond three miles.

With so many mariners perishing, the decision was taken to construct a new beacon on Scilly's most south-westerly crag, Bishop Rock. Today the 49-metre lighthouse, built in 1858, is a seamark firmly etched on every Scillonian's psyche.

Each of Scilly's five inhabited islands has its shipwreck stories, providing fascinating insights into their passengers and cargoes. St Mary's Town Hall is currently being transformed into a state-of-the-art cultural centre and museum. While that work is being undertaken, a temporary 'Museum on the Move' has been created, with pop-up exhibitions featuring Scillonian wrecks.

On Tresco, you can learn about the wrecking in 1798 of Nelson's gunship HMS *Colossus*, carrying priceless Greek and Roman antiquities destined for the British Museum, and marvel at the carved Roman warrior from the ship's stern gallery in the island's History Room. On St Mary's, the tourist information centre recounts the 1875 sinking of SS *Schiller*, a German luxury liner carrying 372 passengers and crew, 335 of whom perished. St Agnes has a shipwreck exhibition inside its hall. While there, visit the beach christened Beady Pool after a 17th-century ship carrying Venetian beads was wrecked nearby.

Scilly's worst maritime disaster, in terms of loss of life, occurred near Bishop Rock in October 1707 when four Royal Navy warships were wrecked and around 1,450 sailors died. The vessels included HMS *Association*, flagship of Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell. His ship's commander miscalculated the ship's latitude, taking the vessel onto the rocks where, according to eyewitnesses, it sank in three or four minutes. Shovell's body was retrieved seven miles away at Porth Hellick on St Mary's; today a modest stone monument to him overlooks the bay.

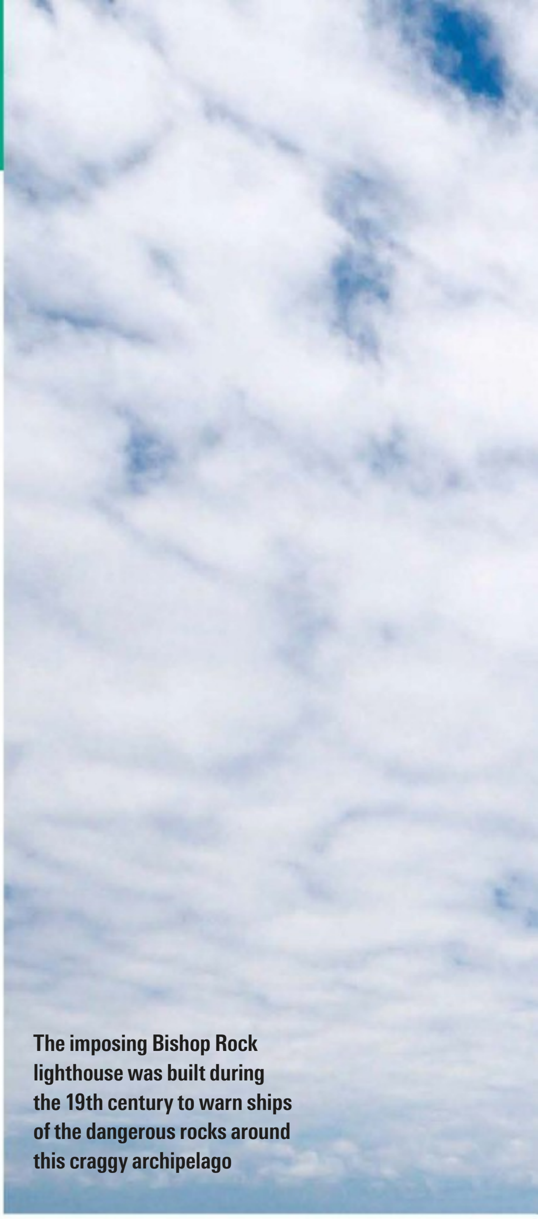
Tresco Abbey Garden features a French bronze cannon from that 1707 disaster, as well as vibrantly painted wooden figureheads that decorated the bows of sailing ships wrecked around Scilly.

This so-called Valhalla collection is now the responsibility of the National Maritime Museum. Figureheads include a gilded eagle; a spirited *Friar Tuck*, from a Liverpool tea clipper that foundered off St Mary's in 1863; a ringleted lady whose ship, the *Indipendenza*, wrecked in 1881, scattered its cargo of Chilean guano and horns across St Mary's Pool; and the white-and-gilded head of a woman who graced the iron barque *Falkland*, which hit Bishop Rock and sank in 1901. H

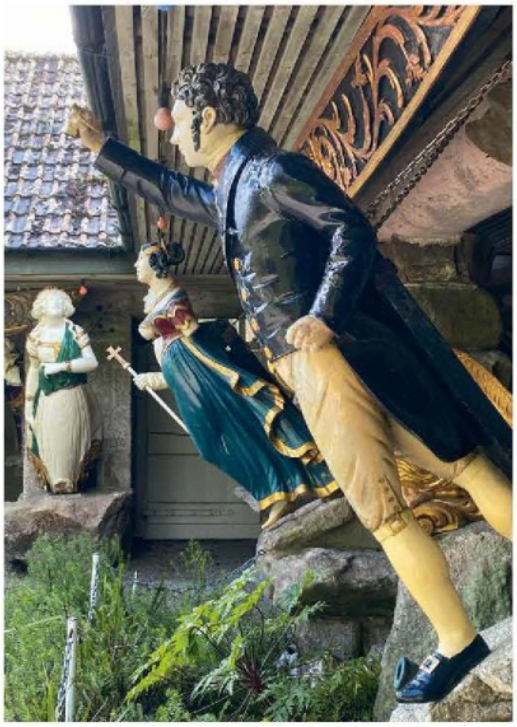
> **The Bishop Rock lighthouse is a seamark firmly etched on every Scillonian's psyche**

Clare Hargreaves is a travel and food writer based in Devon. She is author of several books, and writes for national magazines and newspapers. *clarehargreaves.co.uk*

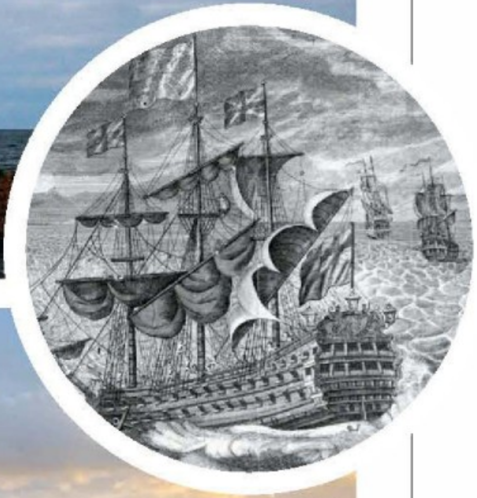
For more information, head to **iosmuseum.org**



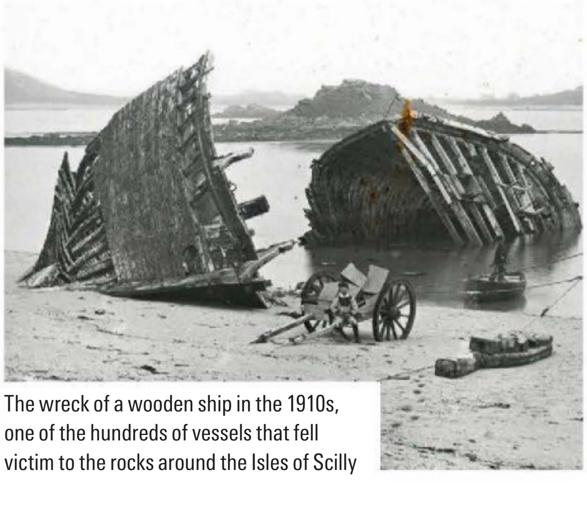
The imposing Bishop Rock lighthouse was built during the 19th century to warn ships of the dangerous rocks around this craggy archipelago



Around 30 figureheads from ships wrecked around Scilly have been preserved in the Valhalla collection in Tresco Abbey Garden



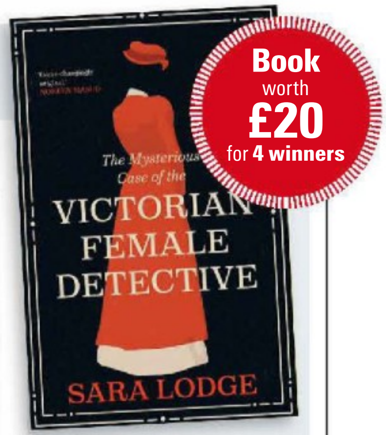
Porth Hellick Beach on St Mary's, where a monument stands to Admiral Sir Cloudesley Shovell, who was killed in the Scilly naval disaster of 1707. INSET HMS *Association* was one of four ships wrecked off Scilly in October 1707, sinking in just three or four minutes



The wreck of a wooden ship in the 1910s, one of the hundreds of vessels that fell victim to the rocks around the Isles of Scilly

ALAMY/CLARE HARGREAVES

PRIZE CROSSWORD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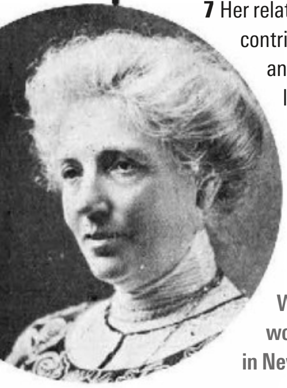
Though depictions of crime detection in the 19th century are dominated by male characters, in truth many women played vital roles. This richly researched and vividly written book sheds new light on these female investigators.

Across

1 He succeeded to Japan's Chrysanthemum Throne in 1989 (7)
5 Members of the Scottish/English royal line that was superseded by the house of Hanover (7)
10 Name of several Ottoman sultans, the first of whom (1512–20) added Syria and Egypt to his empire (5)
11 Traditional personification of the US, roughly equivalent to Britain's John Bull (5,3)
12 The last British monarch of the house of Hanover (8)
13 Protected in the manner of, for example, Bodiam and Leeds castles (6)
14 Prehistoric ritual enclosures (6)
16 The ____ of Whitby (AD 664) saw the crucial decision of the English church to follow Roman rather than Celtic doctrine (5)
18 Creator and first leader of the Soviet Union, whose career was ended by a series of strokes (5)
20 Cochise and Geronimo are two famed leaders of this Native American people (6)
22 Street of Roman origin used by travellers between York and London (6)
23 British soldier and statesman, chief minister of George I, dying in office (8)
25 Term applied to the reign and times of James I of England (8)
26 The first of three Roman leaders with brief reigns who came immediately after Nero (5)
27 Followers of a major branch of Islam, originally supporters of Ali, a son-in-law of Muhammad (7)
28 Caribbean island named Concepción by Columbus in 1498 (7)

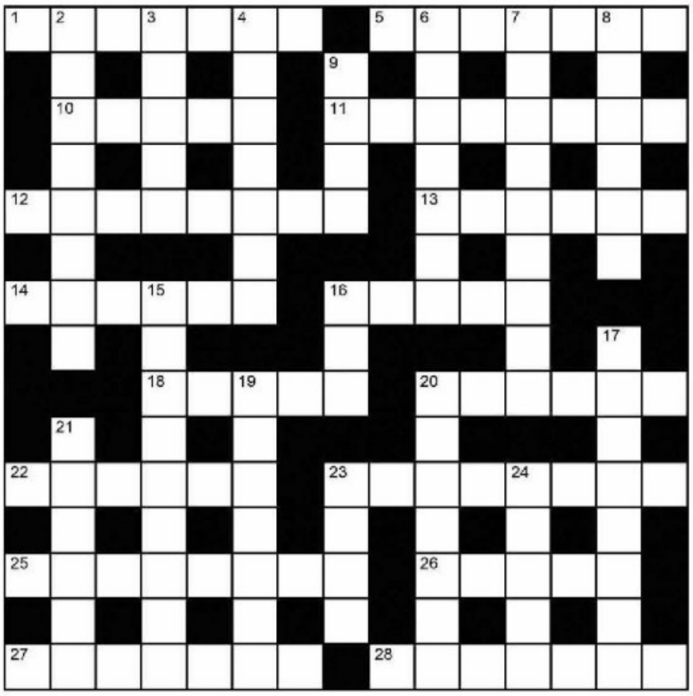
Down

2 South-west Asian people, rulers of Babylonia, defeated by Elamites c1155 BC (8)
3 19th-/20th-century composer of one of the most played concert works, once director of music at St Paul's Girls' School (5)
4 Queen of the Massagetae, said by Herodotus to have won a decisive victory over Cyrus the Great around 530 BC (7)
6 Barbara ____, 20th-century US popular historian, twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize (7)
7 Her relationship with Rasputin contributed to public resentment and political instability leading to the Russian Revolution (9)
8 ____ of Miletus, sixth-century philosopher, one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece (6)
9 The Russian parliamentary assembly created by Nicholas II in response to the 1905 revolution (4)
15 Site of doomed, Churchill-instigated 1915–16 campaign (9)
16 British newspaper, relaunched version of the *Daily Herald* (3)
17 Kate ____, a leading light of the New Zealand women's suffrage movement (8)
19 First president of Tanzania, known affectionately as Mwalimu (Teacher) (7)
20 Regnal title of the 17th-century Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (7)
21 Irish county town where, according to legend, Saint Patrick founded his principal church in the fifth century (6)
23 Chinese dynasty founded by Emperor Taizu in the 10th century (4)
24 ____ of Anjou, popular name of the 13th-century Serbian queen elevated to sainthood by the Orthodox church (5)



Who is this leader of the women's suffrage campaign in New Zealand? *(17 down)*

Compiled by **Eddie James**



How are historic monuments such as Bodiam Castle protected from attack? *(13 across)*

HOW TO ENTER

● Open to residents of the UK (& Channel Islands). Post entries to ***BBC History Magazine*, January 2025 Crossword, PO Box 501, Leicester, LE94 0AA** or email them to ***January2025@historycomps.co.uk*** by 5pm on 18 December 2024. ● Entrants must supply full name, address and phone number. The winners will be the first correct entries drawn at random after the closing time. Winners' names will appear in the March 2025 issue. By entering, participants agree to be bound by the terms and conditions shown in full in the box below. Immediate Media Company Ltd (publishers of *BBC History Magazine*) will use personal details in accordance with the Immediate Privacy Policy at *https://policies.immediate.co.uk/privacy* ● Immediate Media Company Ltd (publishers of *BBC History Magazine*) would love to send you newsletters, together with special offers and other promotions. If you would not like to receive these, please write 'NO INFO' on your entry.
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Solution to our November 2024 crossword

Across 8 Hallam 10 Taler 11 Deschanel 13 Gagarin 15 Lumumba 17/18 Cave art 19 Dere 21 Paisley 22 Bagehot 23 Lithuania 25 Sumer 27 Norman 28 De Gaulle
Down 1 Scutage 2 Etal 3 Currer Bell 4 Bath 5 Amelia 7 Sedan 9 Long March 12 Split 14 Gladiator 16 Madagascar 18 Aryan 20 Starkey 21 Poland 22 Blake 24 Utah 26/6 Moll Cutpurse

Four winners of *Cooking & the Crown*:
Richard Woodroofe, Westbury; Jeremy Smith, Buxton; Cynthia Brown, Leicester; Andrew Wilson, Hyde

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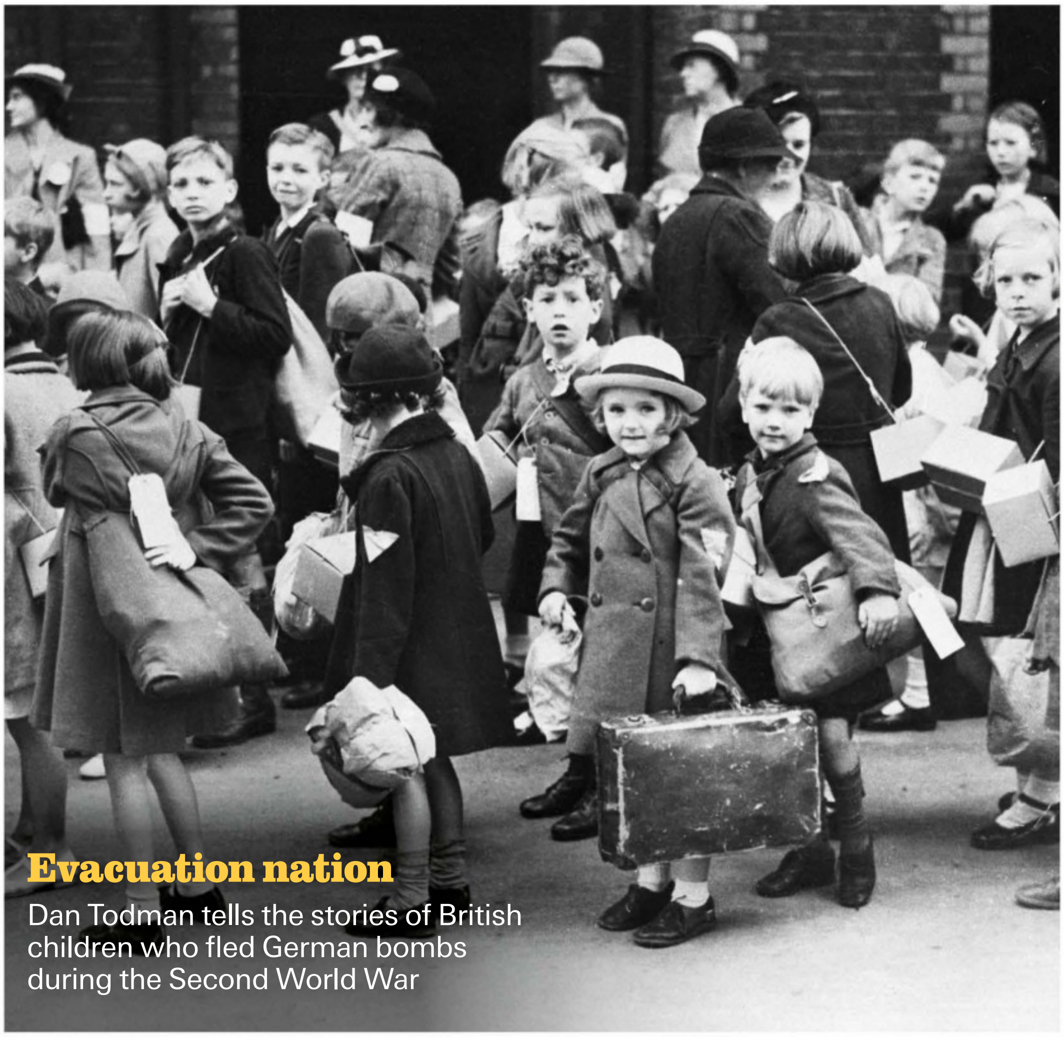
NEXT MONTH

February issue on sale 23 January 2025



Evacuation nation

Dan Todman tells the stories of British children who fled German bombs during the Second World War

Medieval hero

Joanne Arman on how Henry V's brother was cut from the same cloth as the brilliant warrior king

Stories of a continent

Luke Pepera explores Africa's diverse, vibrant histories – and considers why they are so often overlooked

Empire at home

Corinne Fowler shows how the imperial project affected working people in Britain too

Fortune tellers

Martha McGill examines early modern attempts to predict the future

Greatest charter

David Carpenter pays tribute to the 1225 version of Magna Carta

GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY/BRIDGEMAN

The BBC's chief economics correspondent ***Dharshini David*** *chooses*

Joan Clarke

1917–96

DHARSHINI DAVID

Dharshini David is an author and broadcaster. She is the BBC's chief economics correspondent, and a presenter on BBC News programmes. Her latest book, *Environomics* (Simon & Schuster), is available now

When did you first hear about Clarke? I became aware of her vital wartime work at Bletchley Park through the 2014 film *The Imitation Game*, in which she was played by Keira Knightley. Alan Turing's hugely important work there, shockingly overlooked for many years, is now rightly recognised – yet Clarke's contribution is still not widely acknowledged.

What kind of woman was she? A churchman's daughter, she grew up in suburban London, one of five children. She won a scholarship to Newnham College, Cambridge, where she got a double first in mathematics and was a Wrangler [one of the two highest-scoring maths students]. She was recruited by Bletchley Park because of her academic brilliance, and was dogged in her work. After the war she got married – she was also briefly engaged to Turing, who was a friend of her brother – and went on to lead a very under-the-radar life.

What made her a hero? First, her determination to overcome the hurdles she faced as a woman at that time. Cambridge did not award full degrees to women until 1948, and she was paid less than her male colleagues when she arrived at Bletchley Park. She was subsequently promoted to Linguist Grade, despite not speaking another language – a move designed to ensure that she could earn more money.

Second was the extraordinary contribution she made as a codebreaker to saving so many lives during the war. Third, the fact that, like Turing – to whom she remained close even after he broke off their engagement – she was something of an outsider.

What was her finest hour? It has to be her work in Hut 8 at Bletchley Park, alongside Turing and others, deciphering more than 1 million encrypted Enigma code messages sent by the German Navy to coordinate U-boat wolf pack attacks on Allied shipping convoys. These attacks had resulted in the loss of hundreds of merchant ships and thousands of lives, and cracking the code led to a dramatic fall in them, paving the way for the D-Day landings.

Can you see any parallels between her life and yours? We were both born in and grew up in the same area of London, went to Cambridge University and excelled in disciplines that were unusual for women – she studied mathematics while I read economics. Her wartime work was infinitely more important, though.

Would you have made a good Bletchley Park codebreaker? I love doing puzzles, and have the stubborn nature needed to say: "Yes, I can crack this!" But I would not claim to have anything like Joan's mathematical ability. H

Dharshini David was talking to York Membery

Joan Clarke, in an undated photograph. Her wartime work helping to crack the German Enigma code was recognised with an MBE

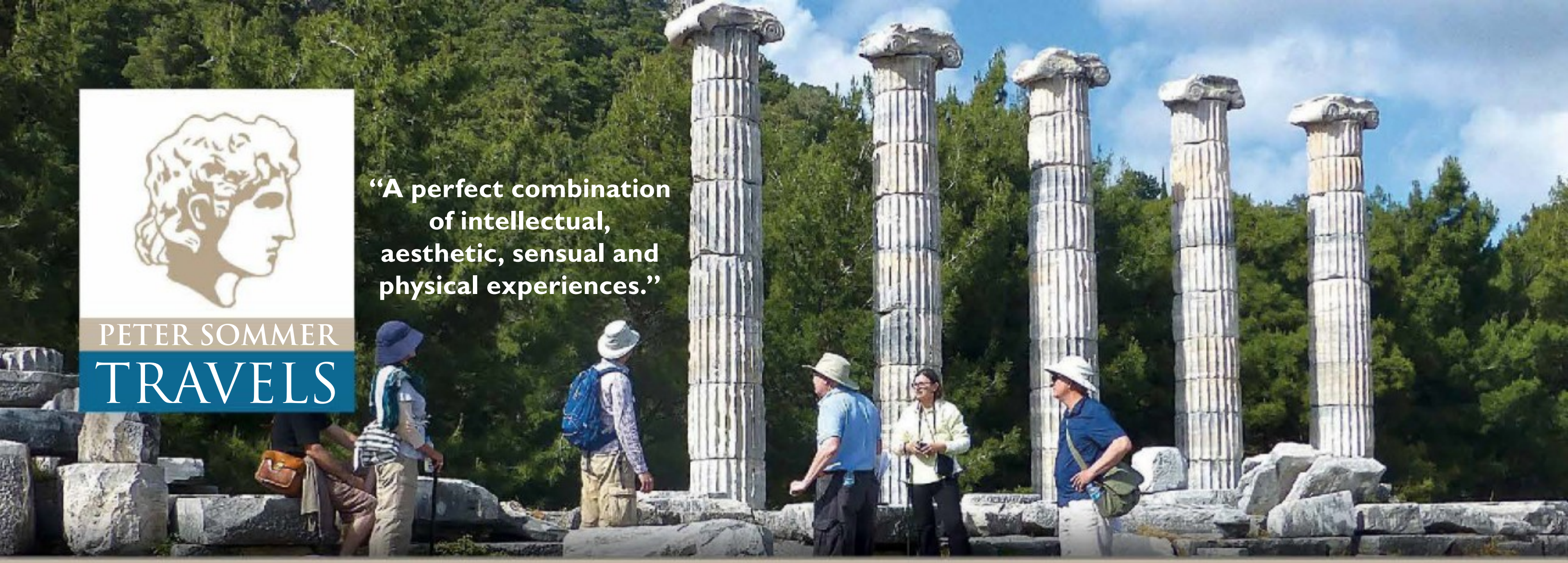
IN PROFILE

Joan Clarke MBE worked as a codebreaker at Bletchley Park during the Second World War. Alongside Alan Turing, to whom she was briefly engaged, she played a key role in the Enigma project decrypting German secret communications, which contributed to Allied victory in the battle of the Atlantic. After the war she worked at GCHQ until 1977. In 2024, a blue plaque was unveiled at her childhood home in West Dulwich, London.

> " She was recruited by Bletchley Park because of her academic brilliance, and was dogged in her codebreaking work there "

In the BBC Radio 4 series **Great Lives**, guests discuss inspirational figures: *bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006qxsb*

BBC RADIO 4



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